

FOREIGN POLICY BELIEFS OF VICTORY PARTY CHAIRMAN
ÜMİT ÖZDAĞ: AN OPERATIONAL CODE ANALYSIS

A Master's Thesis

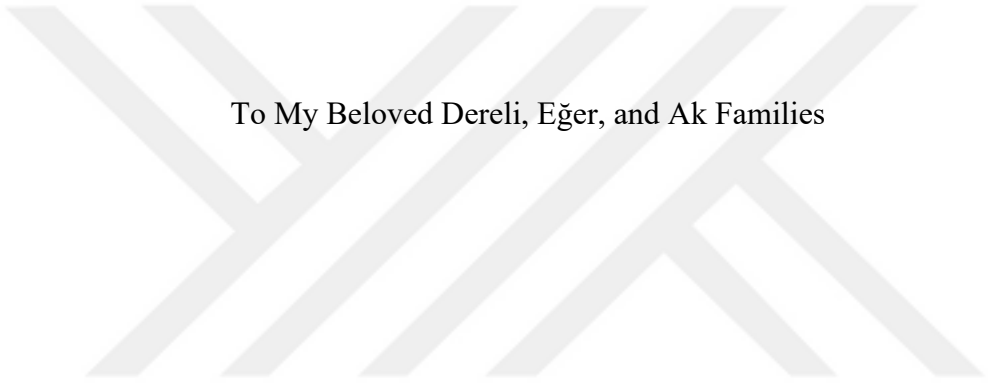
by
ASLIHAN EZGİ DERELİ

Department of
International Relations
İhsan Doğramacı Bilkent University
Ankara
May 2025

ASLIHAN EZGİ DERELİ

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Bilkent University 2025



To My Beloved Dereli, Eđer, and Ak Families

FOREIGN POLICY BELIEFS OF VICTORY PARTY CHAIRMAN ÜMİT ÖZDAĞ: AN
OPERATIONAL CODE ANALYSIS

The Graduate School of Economics and Social Sciences
of
İhsan Doğramacı Bilkent University

by

ASLIHAN EZGİ DERELİ

In Partial fulfilment of the requirement for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

THE DEPARTMENT OF
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
İHSAN DOĞRAMACI BİLKENT UNIVERSITY
ANKARA

May 2025

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OPERATIONAL CODE ANALYSIS

By Aslıhan Ezgi Dereli

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 Arts in International Relations.

.....

Özgür Özdamar
Supervisor

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 Arts in International Relations.

.....

İhsan İlker Aytürk
Examining Committee Member

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 Arts in International Relations.

.....

Nihat Ali Özcan
Examining Committee Member

Approval of the Graduate School of Economics and Social Sciences

.....

Refet S. Gürkaynak
Director

ABSTRACT

FOREIGN POLICY BELIEFS OF VICTORY PARTY CHAIRMAN ÜMİT ÖZDAĞ: AN OPERATIONAL CODE ANALYSIS

Dereli, Aslıhan Ezgi

MA, Department of International Relations

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Özgür Özdamar

May 2025

This thesis examines the foreign policy belief system of Ümit Özdağ, the chairman of the Victory Party (Zafer Partisi), through Operational Code Analysis (OCA) and compares it with a group of European Populist Radical Right-Wing Party (EPRRP) leaders. While the Victory Party has emerged as a significant actor in Turkish politics with its rigid anti-immigration stance and populist-nationalist rhetoric, scholarly attention to its foreign policy orientation remains limited. Drawing on content from Özdağ's public interviews and speeches, this study employs the ProfilerPlus tool and the Verbs in Context System (VICS) to assess his philosophical and instrumental beliefs. The thesis tests three hypotheses concerning Özdağ's beliefs on the nature of the political universe, his instrumental beliefs, and control throughout historical development. The findings reveal that Özdağ's foreign policy worldview is more conflictual and uncooperative than the average EPRRP leader. While sharing some

ideological similarities with his European counterparts, such as skepticism toward international cooperation and a strong emphasis on national sovereignty, Özdağ exhibits a particularly antagonistic view of the global system and a less inclined belief towards cooperative strategies. These patterns suggest that while Prof. Özdağ fits within the broader populist radical right-wing party tradition, his foreign policy belief system reflects a distinctive articulation of these ideas. This thesis contributes methodologically by empirically applying OCA in a non-Western context by offering the first systematic leadership-level analysis of a Turkish populist radical right-wing party (PRRP) figure, thereby opening new avenues for comparative populism and foreign policy research.

Key Words: Comparative Foreign Policy, Operational Code Analysis, Populism, Populist Radical Right, Ümit Özdağ, Victory Party (Zafer Partisi)

ÖZET

ZAFER PARTİSİ GENEL BAŞKANI ÜMİT ÖZDAĞ'IN DIŞ POLİTİKA İNANÇLARI: OPERASYONEL KOD YAKLAŞIMI

Dereli, Aslıhan Ezgi

Yüksek Lisans, Uluslararası İlişkiler Bölümü

Tez Danışmanı: Prof. Dr. Özgür Özdamar

Mayıs 2025

Bu tez, Zafer Partisi'nin genel başkanı Ümit Özdağ'ın dış politika inanç sistemini Operasyonel Kod Analizi (OCA) yöntemiyle incelemekte ve Avrupa'daki Popülist Radikal Sağ Parti (APRSP) liderleriyle karşılaştırmaktadır. Sert göçmen karşıtı tutumu ve popülist-milliyetçi söylemiyle Türk siyasetinde dikkat çeken Zafer Partisi'nin dış politikaya yönelik yaklaşımı, akademik alanda sınırlı ölçüde ele alınmıştır. Bu çalışma, Özdağ'ın kamuya açık röportajları ve konuşmalarından elde edilen veriler aracılığıyla ProfilerPlus aracı ve Verbs in Context System (VICS) kullanılarak felsefi ve araçsal inançlarını analiz etmektedir. Tez kapsamında Özdağ'ın siyasal evrenin doğasına ilişkin görüşleri, işbirliği stratejileri ve tarihsel gelişim boyunca özdenetimine ilişkin üç hipotezi test etmektedir. Bulgular, Özdağ'ın dış politika dünya görüşünün APRRP liderlerine kıyasla daha çatışmacı ve iş birliği karşıtı olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Her ne kadar uluslararası iş birliğine karşı kuşku ve ulusal egemenliğe vurgu gibi

ideolojik benzerlikler taşısa da Özdağ uluslararası sisteme karşı daha düşmanca bir bakış açısı ve sınırlı bir iş birliği inancına sahiptir. Bu yönüyle, popülist radikal sağ parti geleneği içinde yer almakla birlikte, dış politika inançları bu ideolojik yapının bir yansımasını sunmaktadır. Bu tez, metodolojik olarak operasyonel kod analizini Batı dışındaki bir bağlamda uygulayarak; ampirik olarak ise Türkiye’deki bir popülist radikal sağ parti (PRSP) liderine ilişkin ilk sistematik liderlik düzeyinde çalışmayı sunarak karşılaştırmalı popülizm ve dış politika araştırmalarına yeni bir katkı sağlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Karşılaştırmalı Dış Politika, Operasyonel Kod Analizi, Popülizm, Popülist Radikal Sağ, Ümit Özdağ, Zafer Partisi

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Completing this thesis marks the end of an academic journey and the culmination of countless moments of support, encouragement, and collaboration. I am sincerely and profoundly grateful to all the individuals and institutions whose unwavering assistance made this endeavor possible. Without their presence, this work would not have come to fruition.

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my thesis advisor, Professor Özgür Özdamar. His guidance throughout this journey has been invaluable. He introduced me to foreign policy analysis, leadership studies, and political psychology, and helped shape my academic perspective with his thoughtful mentorship and constant support. In addition, I am grateful to the juries of my thesis committee, İhsan İlker Aytürk and Nihat Ali Özcan, for their feedback, incisive questions, and constructive criticisms. Their insights not only improved the analytical quality of this thesis but also helped me grow as a future scholar.

I would also like to acknowledge Professor Michael Young and the team at Social Science Automation for granting me access to ProfilerPlus. This tool was essential for the methodology section of this study. Their generosity and openness in supporting early-career researchers are genuinely appreciated. I sincerely thank İhsan Doğramacı Bilkent University, where I worked as a research and teaching assistant. The intellectually stimulating environment and the financial support I received from the university provided the stability and resources I needed to carry out this work. I am

particularly grateful to our department secretary, Ece Engin, whose quiet strength, patience, and compassion were a steady source of comfort throughout challenging periods. Her warmth and readiness to help did not go unnoticed.

I greatly appreciate Dr. Sercan Canbolat, whose academic rigor and humility deeply inspired me. His guidance in navigating the nuances of operational code analysis and its adaptation into Turkish was instrumental, and his presence served as both a mentor and a role model during this thesis process. I also extend my heartfelt thanks to Dr. Onur Erpul, who assisted me in more ways than I can express, despite being the one I officially assisted. His critical insights, generous spirit, and moral support were invaluable. Likewise, I thank Dr. Faruk Aksoy for his understanding, encouragement, and openness whenever I sought help or voiced uncertainty.

On a more personal note, I express my boundless gratitude to my beloved parents, Kadriye and Hikmet Dereli. Their love, moral guidance, and countless sacrifices have carried me through the most demanding phases of my academic life. They have given me the means and the courage to pursue my ambitions. I dedicate this achievement to them.

To my dearest friends and roommates, Nilay Beril Çiftçi and Defne Irmak Balcı, I thank you for your constant understanding, comforting words, and shared silences. You made this journey lighter, and your companionship turned long nights and stressful days into shared memories I will always cherish. To my partner, Murat Barış Erol, thank you for your enduring patience, calming presence, and faith in me,

especially when I struggled to find it in myself. Your unwavering support gave me the strength to stand out, even during the most trying moments.

To every one of you: this thesis is a reflection of my academic efforts and a testament to your kindness, generosity, and belief in me. I am sincerely and eternally grateful.



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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, populist radical right-wing parties (PRRPs) have gained significant ground across the globe, not only through electoral success but also by redefining the political landscape domestically and internationally. Despite differences in national contexts, these parties tend to share core ideological characteristics, which are nativism, authoritarianism, and populism.

While populism advocates for a division between a corrupt elite and the people (Mudde, 2007, p. 22), nativism maintains that only native people should reside in the state. Combined with authoritarian tendencies, this ideological blend leads to exclusionary and anti-pluralist political agendas. Increasingly, foreign policy-related issues have become a platform through which PRRPs express and project their beliefs (Chrysosgelos, 2021).

Unlike in the European context, where scholars widely analyze populist radical right-wing parties through comparative frameworks, Turkish scholarly work rarely takes a similar approach, especially in foreign policy. In Turkey, Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP) (JDP, Justice and Development Party) operates as a populist actor; however, its foreign policy, rooted in neo-Ottomanist ambitions, diverges significantly from the nationalist, defensive, and exclusionary stance typical of European populist radical right-wing parties (EPRRPs) (Oswald, 2022). In contrast, Zafer Partisi (ZP, Victory Party), founded in 2021 by Ümit Özdağ, offers a relevant example of a

populist radical right-wing actor. The party, founded in a growing migrant crisis, political discontent, and economic hardship, presents itself as the “true voice” of the Turkish people. Its main agenda centers on defending the Turkish nation from perceived cultural and demographic threats brought by millions of refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, and many other Middle Eastern countries, especially after the Arab Spring. While Turkey has historically hosted a variety of nationalist parties, such as the Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (MHP) (NAP, Nationalist Action Party) and the İYİ Parti (İYİP) (GOODP, Good Party), Zafer Partisi stands apart in terms of its populist discourse and distinct foreign policy stance. This thesis argues that Zafer Partisi constitutes Turkey’s first genuine PRRP, aligning in both content and political style with its European counterparts.

1.1. Significance of the Study

This study contributes to three underdeveloped yet increasingly relevant areas in the literature. First, while the impact of populism on foreign policy has been widely examined in Western contexts, there is a notable lack of research on this subject in Turkey, particularly from an ideational and leadership-based perspective. Scholars have recently gone beyond specific case studies and anecdotal comments, calling for systematic investigations into whether populist parties regularly follow distinguishable foreign policy patterns (Destradi & Plagemann, 2019). Second, the ZP’s exclusive focus on the irregular migration issue enables it to reframe foreign policy issues as extensions of a domestic security issue, including relations with the European Union (EU), Syria, and Middle Eastern countries. Third, this thesis offers a unique methodological contribution by examining Ümit Özdağ’s foreign policy beliefs using operational code analysis (OCA). While OCA has been used

extensively in leadership and international relations studies, it has been understudied in the context of populist actors in Turkey. This approach is specifically appropriate for Ümit Özdağ because he constantly expresses his opinions on foreign policy in public interviews and digital platforms. He has an academic background and a keen interest in national security. Unlike many political leaders who delegate foreign policy discourse to specialists, Özdağ consistently articulates a coherent and ideologically driven perspective. This perspective makes his discourse especially suitable for operational code analysis, a method designed to uncover leaders' views on how the international system works and how goals are pursued within it (Walker et al., 1998). By focusing on Özdağ's foreign policy beliefs, the thesis offers an empirical lens through which one can assess how populist radical right-wing ideologies manifest in a non-Western setting.

1.2. Research Questions and Overview

Building on this framework, the thesis centers around the following main research question:

Does Zafer Partisi, as the only PRRP representative in Turkey, align with the foreign policy beliefs observed among EPRRPs?

To investigate, this study poses two related sub-questions:

- 1. What are the philosophical and instrumental beliefs of Ümit Özdağ, as revealed through operational code analysis?*
- 2. Do these belief patterns demonstrate a resemblance or difference to the foreign policy profiles of EPRRP leaders?*

The objective is to discover whether the leader of the Victory Party and his European equivalents share any ideological or strategic similarities. This thesis offers a deeper

insight into the leader's foreign policy thinking by concentrating on his cognitive and belief systems rather than just the party's program, manifesto, or election campaigns. This approach is especially relevant in populist foreign policy, where leadership often dominates party identity and policy direction (Moffitt, 2016). In line with the main and sub-questions, this thesis tests three main hypotheses outlined in detail in the research design chapter.

In order to test my hypotheses, I will be using the Verbs in Context System (VICS), which was developed by Walker, Schafer, and Young (1998). Using a content analysis technique based on public speeches and statements, this system enables the researcher to make deductions from the decisions made by leaders. VICS evaluates leaders' cognitive beliefs by looking at how they conduct the political "self" and "other" relations: The idea behind the system is that individual's discourse about power dynamics in the political universe reveals a lot about how they feel about the exercise of power (Walker and Schafer, 2006a, p.30). This system codes verbs based on their intensity and direction. The verb's category, tense, and subject are identified, as are the action's domain, target, and context. As a result, the approach enables the researcher to classify transitive verbs into "self," "other," "cooperative," and "conflictual."

There are several reasons for adopting this method in the current study. First, OCA provides insight into enduring belief structures rather than momentary political calculations (Walker et al., 2003). These insights allowed me to examine long-term patterns in Ümit Özdağ's foreign policy thinking, not just isolated decisions or statements. Second, it captures how individual personality, ideology, and the political environment influence a leader's strategic worldview, making it especially useful for

analyzing populist figures, who often combine rhetorical rigidity with unpredictable behavior. Third, by utilizing an automated content analysis, OCA helps overcome practical challenges related to limited access for policymakers in restrictive political environments. While formal speech transcripts may be scarce, Özdağ's frequent media appearances and commentary provide a sufficient body of text for systematic analysis.

This study utilizes the ProfilerPlus program, which facilitates the automated application of VICS coding. Since the norming group's scores will come from the same automation, a reliable study will be carried out that allows comparisons between cross-case belief scores (Walker & Schafer, 2006a). The study by Özdamar and Ceydilek (2020), which measured the belief systems of seven EPRRP leaders, provides a methodological and empirical benchmark for this study. By applying the same analytic framework, this thesis offers a meaningful comparison between Ümit Özdağ and similar European actors, contributing to a more global understanding of populist radical right-wing leaders' foreign policy beliefs. Furthermore, this study is among the first theses using the Turkish operational code scheme. At the same time, since it is the most detailed leadership analysis written about Ümit Özdağ, it contributes to the development of the Turkish operational code literature and aims to guide those who will study the same leader in the future.

1.3. Organization of the Chapters

The following sections will build on this introductory chapter. The next chapter begins with a comprehensive literature review. It covers three main strands of literature: the rise of PRRPs, their ideological roots and core issues, and EPRRP's foreign policy. The chapter ends by highlighting the debates and the emotional

foundations of PRRPs, clarifying the conceptual boundaries used in this thesis, especially the classification of Zafer Partisi as a PRRP. Chapter three shifts to the field of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), introducing the main theoretical approaches and highlighting leadership-centered frameworks. It contrasts rational models with cognitive approaches and explains the value of psychological profiling tools like Leadership Trait Analysis (LTA) and Operational Code Analysis (OCA). Chapter four offers the political and historical background of the Zafer Partisi and its chairman, Ümit Özdağ. It explores the party's foundation, role in the 2023 elections, and its limited but growing presence in Turkish academic literature, concluding with a brief account of Özdağ's political background. Chapter five outlines the research design, including the tools used for analysis (ProfilerPlus and VICS), the time frame, context of the data, and the main hypotheses of this thesis. Chapter six presents the findings, starting with an analysis of Özdağ's foreign policy belief system and leadership style, followed by a comparison with the seven EPRRP leaders based on Özdamar and Ceydilek's work (2020). Lastly, chapter seven concludes the thesis by summarizing the main insights, revisiting the results, addressing the study's limitations, and proposing suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 2:

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The rise of populist radical right-wing parties (PRRPs)

Populism has emerged as one of the most significant political phenomena shaped by a complex interaction of economic, cultural, and political factors that have developed over decades. Mudde defined populism as “an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (2004, p. 543). Populism is a ‘thin-centered ideology,’ and because of this ideological flexibility, it can cooperate easily with other thick or, in other words, core ideologies like communism, nationalism, or socialism (Mudde, 2004, p. 544; Freeden, 1998, p. 750). Populism can be associated with both the right and left wings, but today, it is mainly associated with the radical right. In this literature review section, I will provide the historical trajectory of the populist radical right-wing parties (PRRPs), examining their ideological evolution, electoral success, and structural impact on democratic governance via foreign policy.

The roots of populism can be traced back to the early 20th century, emerging during crises of liberal democracy and socio-economic upheavals (Mudde, 2016). During the 1930s and 1940s, Latin America witnessed the rise of populism, where leaders such as Juan Perón in Argentina and Getúlio Vargas in Brazil combined economic

nationalism with mass mobilization strategies (Rodríguez-Pose, 2022; Cox, 2018). The collapse of communism in the 1990s further accelerated populist movements, particularly in Eastern Europe, as countries like Hungary and Poland rejected neoliberal reforms and embraced nationalism (Rodríguez-Pose, 2022). This wave of populism coincided with the deepening of European integration under the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, which sparked widespread Euroscepticism (Brack & Startin, 2015; Eichenberg & Dalton, 2007). PRRPs framed the European Union as a supranational organization undermining national sovereignty (Mudde, 2016; Verbeek & Zaslove, 2017). The treaty allowed the free movement of capital, goods, and services, which simultaneously led to increased immigration flows, and economic liberalization exacerbated anxieties about globalization and cultural homogenization, providing fertile ground for PRRPs.

The 2000s marked a period of mainstreaming and political consolidation for PRRPs. Global events such as the 9/11 attacks and the ensuing “War on Terror” allowed these parties to link immigration, especially from Muslim-majority countries, security concerns, broadening their appeal beyond economic grievances (Greven, 2016). The enlargement of the European Union in 2004 intensified fears of migration within the bloc, further strengthening PRR narratives. Significant electoral breakthroughs accompanied these developments, such as PRRPs. These parties have entered national parliaments and formed coalitions, as seen in Austria, Italy, and the Netherlands, solidifying their legitimacy within political systems that had long excluded them.

The 2010s represented a milestone for PRRPs since they exploited overlapping crises that created fertile ground for them to aggrandize their power. The 2008 global

financial crisis deepened economic insecurity and eroded trust in established elites (Algan et al., 2017; Fetzer, 2019). Respectively, the 2015 refugee crisis heightened fears of cultural change and competition over resources (Davis & Deole, 2016). PRRPs intensified their anti-immigration, anti-globalization rhetoric, presenting themselves as protectors of “the people” against external threats such as refugees and internal enemies like “elites” (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). The Brexit referendum and Donald Trump’s election in 2016 further demonstrated the global resurgence of these nationalist, anti-establishment narratives, giving PRRPs momentum and legitimacy. Meanwhile, the rise of social media gave these parties the tools to set the agenda on traditional media, amplify their messages, and mobilize supporters more effectively (Minkenberg, 2016; Moffitt, 2016).

In the 2020s, PRRPs have demonstrated remarkable adaptability, leveraging contemporary crises to sustain their relevance. The COVID-19 pandemic allowed them to critique government overreach and mobilize anti-establishment sentiment (Bobbà & Hubé, 2021), while economic challenges like inflation and energy shortages, exacerbated by the Russia-Ukraine war, provided new avenues for their rhetoric (Ivaldi & Zankina, 2023). Additionally, PRRPs have opposed climate policies, framing them as elitist initiatives that harm ordinary citizens, further solidifying their appeal to those who feel left behind by rapid economic and social transitions (Lockwood, 2018).

The enduring success of PRRPs lies in their ability to merge localized grievances with broader global trends, adapting their strategies to evolving societal concerns while maintaining core narratives of anti-elitism, nationalism, and cultural preservation. Rodríguez-Pose (2020) notes that much of this support arises from

regions experiencing economic and social decline, which he terms the “revenge of the places that don’t matter.” These parties have effectively capitalized on systemic failures and territorial inequalities, offering simplistic solutions and emphasizing sovereignty and cultural identity as antidotes to globalization and liberal governance. Thus, the emergence of PRRPs throughout Europe highlights fundamental dissatisfaction within populations struggling with political alienation, cultural anxiety, and economic instability, underscoring significant problems for liberal democracy. This phenomenon represents a defining feature of 21st-century politics, reshaping the political landscape and raising critical questions about the future of democratic governance (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013).

2.2. Key Characteristics of PRRPs

According to Mudde (2016, p. 19), the interaction of populism, authoritarianism, and nativism is the ideological underpinnings of PRRPs, which form their unique political agenda. Nativism constitutes the cornerstone of their ideology, which emphasizes the importance of a native group, defined by ethnicity, culture, or heritage, as the legitimate recipients of state benefits. This exclusionary logic frames external influences, particularly immigration and multiculturalism, as existential threats to the cultural and demographic integrity of the nation-state. Consequently, PRRPs advocate for policies that aim to safeguard an idealized national identity, often constructed as a response to perceived challenges posed by globalization and cosmopolitanism.

Another fundamental pillar of their worldview is authoritarianism, which demonstrates a commitment to centralized government and the implementation of strict law-and-order measures to maintain social stability and moral unity. PRRPs

advance policies emphasizing harsh penalties, expanded surveillance, and heightened state intervention as necessary mechanisms to combat perceived threats such as criminality, cultural decay, and external disruption. These authoritarian tendencies align with their broader emphasis on preserving traditional hierarchies and maintaining the societal order against forces of change (Mudde, 2017).

Populism serves as the integrative framework that binds these elements together, framing politics as a moral dichotomy between the virtuous “people” and the corrupt, self-serving “elite” (Mudde, 2004, p. 546). PRRPs see themselves as the true representative of the people’s will, asserting that they can express the grievances and needs of the public against a political elite that is out of touch and frequently delegitimized. By depending more on sentimental appeals and symbolic narratives than on real policy recommendations, this discourse simplifies complicated sociopolitical issues to a binary dichotomy (Destradi et al., 2021; Liang, 2016). Their nativist agenda obtains support from the idea that “the people,” which is at the heart of their populist rhetoric, are a mythical and homogeneous entity that represents the moral and cultural core of a nation rather than an inclusive or pluralistic construct.

By positioning themselves as the guardians of national sovereignty and identity, PRRPs can impact public dissatisfaction with the political status quo due to a combination of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. Their use of a triadic ideological framework enables them to respond to societal insecurities and ambiguities by presenting a narrative of regeneration and protection framed in terms of cultural preservation and moral redemption (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013). PRRPs successfully navigate the complexities of contemporary domestic and international politics by utilizing these ideological instruments, establishing themselves as

significant players in the ongoing challenge to liberal democratic values and global governance structures.

Besides these core principles of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism, PRRPs have several other supplementary traits that increase their political appeal and adaptability. At their core, PRRPs adopt a Manichean worldview, which portrays politics as a moral struggle between two antagonistic groups. This dualistic framework echoes realist thought in international relations, where political actors operate under a belief in an anarchical, conflict-driven world order (Destradi et al., 2021, p. 667). As a representation of the country's cultural and moral center, PRRPs define “the people” and argue that this identity is threatened by both internal elites and other pressures like immigration and globalization (Destradi et al., 2021; Liang, 2016). Their rhetoric is deeply anti-elitist and anti-establishment, appealing to widespread public distrust by framing traditional institutions and political parties as out of touch with or actively undermining the will of ordinary citizens.

PRRPs are known for their capacity to generate and maintain crisis narratives. They highlight approaching threats such as political instability, cultural deterioration, or economic decline and present themselves as exceptionally qualified to address these issues. In addition to mobilizing public support, these crisis narratives justify the argument for extreme measures and structural reforms. They increase the public’s anxiety while reinforcing the need for their leadership by framing problems harshly (Destradi & Plagemann, 2019; Liang, 2016).

A further characteristic that distinguishes PRRPs is charismatic leadership. By avoiding the conventional institutional frameworks, leaders of these parties frequently establish direct and close connections with their supporters. They present

themselves as political outsiders who can provide unconventional answers and challenge strong institutions. Due to this personalization of politics, the leader's identity becomes intrinsically tied to the party, and the party's appeal primarily relies on their authority and vision (Mudde, 2007; Destradi & Plagemann, 2019). Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's leadership exemplifies this trend, displaying the politicization and personalization of foreign policy institutions (Özpek & Yaşar, 2017; Yanık & Özdamar, 2024)

Another key characteristic of PRRPs is their practical usage of contemporary communication platforms. Leaders can reach their followers directly by using these digital platforms, especially social media, allowing them to bypass traditional media channels. They frequently use provocative and emotionally charged messaging in their communication strategy, which helps them shape public opinion, establish the scope of political discussions, and set the agenda. In addition to increasing their visibility, this digital-first strategy frames them as the people's unfiltered and responsive voices (Destradi et al., 2021). For instance, Trump's 2016 electoral campaign demonstrated the strategic use of digital communication to mobilize voters and dominate the political discourse (Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017).

One of PRRP's main advantages is its flexibility in views on policies. These parties adjust their economic policies to suit the preferences of their supporters rather than following strict ideological frameworks. Their emphasis on sociocultural concerns like immigration and national identity frequently precedes their economic programs, whether they support market liberalization or protectionism. Due to this pragmatic strategy, they can continue to appeal to a broad audience without sacrificing their fundamental goals (Mudde, 2007). PRRPs also use the progressive normalization of

radical ideas as a key tactic. They can influence public opinion and bring previously insignificant ideas into the mainstream by introducing controversial policies or rhetoric in more moderate tones. This strategy further integrates these narratives into the broader political context by justifying their ideas and imposing pressure on other political actors to react (Liang, 2016).

To sum up, PRRPs have a variety of distinctive traits. These include using crisis narratives, Manichean worldview, capacity to alter policies, charismatic leadership, competency of digital communication, and progressive normalization of radical ideas. With core characteristics, PRRPs ensure their effectiveness and stability in contemporary political systems.

2.3. European Populist Radical Right-Wing Parties (EPRRPs) and Foreign Policy

This section focuses on the foreign policy and ideological foundations of key European populist radical right-wing parties (EPRRPs), including France's National Rally (NR, formerly Front National), Hungary's FIDESZ, the Netherlands' Party for Freedom (PVV), the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), Sweden Democrats (SD), Germany's Alternative for Germany (AfD), and Austria's Freedom Party (FPÖ) (Özdamar & Ceydilek, 2020). These parties shape their ideology around nationalism, Euroscepticism, anti-immigration stance, critiques of liberal democracy, and resistance to globalization. A distinctive set of priorities and strategies characterizes the parties mentioned earlier. These characteristics include prioritization on national sovereignty, opposition to both supranational institutions like the European Union (EU) and international organizations like the United Nations

(UN), which they see as undermining state autonomy and promoting elitist or globalist agendas (Mudde, 2007).

They also show resistance to further European integration, which is closely tied to the idea that integration compromises national interests and weakens cultural identity (Balfour et al., 2016; Chrysogelos, 2017). The most essential agenda topics in their foreign policy revolve around the concerns of security and immigration. EPRRPs often see refugees and migrants as a fundamental threat to national security and societal cohesion, so they suggest a solution of strict immigration controls and enhancing border security (Destradi et al., 2021; Liang, 2016).

Another crucial foreign policy preference is their approach to foreign alliances and global power realignment in the international system. EPRRPs attempted to establish informal relations with other radical right-wing parties sharing common ideological patterns in different countries. Furthermore, they typically take a selective approach to major world powers, establishing partnerships based on how well they align with nationalist objectives and overturn liberal international norms.

2.3.1. Prioritization of national sovereignty and opposition to the European Union (EU) and the United Nations (UN)

EPRRPs perceive that the EU and UN are violating national sovereignty. This rejection emerges from the idea that these institutions enforce elite-driven policies that undermine the will of the people and democratic governance (Chrysogelos, 2021). The most prominent example is the Brexit campaign by Nigel Farage, which emphasized the need to “take back control” from Brussels. He mentioned that the referendum is the biggest event in the EU’s history and a Brexit vote would “bring an end to the entire European project.” (The Parliament, 2016) Similarly, Hungary’s

prime minister, Viktor Orbán, has frequently accused EU institutions of imposing constraints on his nation, especially regarding judicial and immigration reforms. He stated that “Brussels is not our boss. We are an independent sovereign Hungarian nation.” (Hungary Today, 2022) He also shared similar ideas about the UN’s Global Compact for Migration in 2018, criticizing it as threatening Hungary’s national identity and security. In another immigration speech, Orban stated that “We do not want to see a significant minority among ourselves that has different cultural characteristics and background. We would like to keep Hungary as Hungary.” (Institute of International Relations, 2015)

Marine Le Pen of France’s National Rally said, “I am deeply Eurosceptic; the way the EU works is anti-democratic and anti-national” (El País, 2024). In another interview in 2014, she mentioned that “...The EU is deeply harmful; it is an anti-democratic monster. I want to prevent it from becoming fatter, from continuing to breathe, from grabbing everything with its paws, and from extending its tentacles into all areas of our legislation. In our glorious history, millions have died to ensure that our country remains free. Today, we are simply stealing our right to self-determination from us.” (Spiegel International, 2014) She has also criticized UN human rights and climate change projects as hidden attempts to weaken national sovereignty over cultural and economic policies.

Under Matteo Salvini's leadership, the Lega Nord of Italy has harshly criticized EU budgetary policies, charging Brussels with imposing economic policies that are detrimental to Italy's interests (Verbeek & Zaslove, 2015). In 2018, Salvini said, “Italy pays more into the EU budget than it gets back, and seeing as we pay for our

club membership, we want this club to treat us with respect.” (Yahoo Finance, 2018)

Additionally, he has said that the UN pushes policies that encourage open borders and damage national security (Verbeek & Zaslove, 2015). In one interview, he stated, “The biggest problem in Italy is work. And out-of-control immigration damages the labor market, because Italians can’t compete with illegal workers who are being exploited. So, to restore dignity to work, we must control immigration.” (Time, 2018)

2.3.2. Stance on European Integration

EPRRPs have opposed European integration because they consider it an imminent threat to national identity and autonomy. The FPÖ in Austria has been a strong opponent of EU treaties, namely the Lisbon Treaty, arguing that it gives Brussels excessive power. According to Heinz-Christian Strache, the former head of FPÖ, Austria was practically transformed into a “province of Brussels” by EU policies (Vasilopoulou, 2016; Mudde, 2007). Similarly, Poland’s Law and Justice Party (PiS), which prioritizes the protection of Polish sovereignty and national identity, has opposed EU interference in its judicial reforms (Chrysosgelos, 2021). Geert Wilders’ Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV) campaigns emphasize Euroscepticism. Even though he was not against cooperation, he stated that “Co-operating with other countries is fine, but while keeping our national sovereignty and identity.” In the party program, his party further advocates “cooperation with like-minded people” and an end to “Europhile dreams”. (The London Economic, 2024) Citing the loss of political and cultural autonomy, Wilders has advocated for the Netherlands to withdraw from the EU (Nexit). In an interview, he said that “I congratulate the British people for beating the political elite in both London and Brussels, and I think we can do the

same... The Dutch would like to be in charge again of their own budget, their national borders, and their immigration policy... We should have a referendum about a ‘Nexit’ as soon as possible.” (Reuters, 2016)

Although these parties reject deeper integration, Cadier and Lequesne (2020) observe that their orientations to current EU membership vary depending on the domestic environment. For instance, whereas Nigel Farage advocated a complete exit through Brexit, Marine Le Pen has argued for limiting France's commitments to the EU without withdrawing completely. According to Giurlando (2020), populist parties such as the Lega Nord in Italy use membership benefits to criticize EU fiscal regulations, exhibiting practical adaptations to their ideological opposition. According to Wajner and Giurlando (2023), populist discourse regarding European integration predominantly employs a dual narrative of resistance and victimization. In addition to framing integration measures as exploitation tools, this dualism presents populist politicians as protectors of cultural integrity and national sovereignty. This condition enables these politicians to appeal to the economic and nationalist grievances of the people they represent.

2.3.3. Foreign Alliances and Global Realignment

A realignment of traditional international relations paradigms is apparent in the foreign collaborations of EPRRPs. With an emphasis on sovereignty and the protection of national interests, these parties seek to adjust foreign policy to better align with their nationalist and populist beliefs. Although their disapproval of liberal international structures like the EU and NATO is widely known, their stance toward the three superpowers—China, Russia, and the US—reveals something about their

larger objectives for global realignment. (Chryssogelos, 2021, p. 4; Wajner & Giurlando, 2023).

Russia has been seen as a strategic partner for many EPRRPs. Leaders such as Matteo Salvini of Italy's League and Marine Le Pen of France's National Rally have openly admired Russian President Vladimir Putin. They see them as a representation of influential, independent leader who aligns with their own nationalist goals (Mudde, 2017). Marine Le Pen's party has received financial support from Russian banks, which created a debate in French domestic politics (Liang, 2016). Similarly, Salvini's League occasionally called for removing EU sanctions on Russia, claiming that they are unfairly punitive and harmful to Italian economic interests (Verbeek & Zaslove, 2015). In Hungary, Viktor Orbán also kept close relations with Moscow and tried to strengthen energy and economic cooperation through initiatives funded by Russian loans (Politico, 2024). As can be concluded, Russia's conservative values, anti-globalist rhetoric, and willingness to challenge the West align with EPRRP ideological foundations (Chryssogelos, 2021).

EPRRPs' relations with China are more pragmatic and influenced primarily by economic factors rather than ideological alignment. Despite China's authoritarian governing style being incompatible with the populist rhetoric of democratic sovereignty, its financial power and strategic investments in Europe have made China a strategic partner for some EPRRPs. One of them is the League in Italy, which supported participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Even though there was opposition from other EU institutions and the USA, the League framed it as a chance to boost Italy's struggling economy. (Giurlando, 2020; Chryssogelos, 2021).

Another example is from Poland's Law and Justice (PiS), in its early years, PiS sought closer ties with China through the 16+1 platform, continuing a strategy rooted in the intermarium idea of regional cooperation to counterbalance Germany and Russia. However, as the U.S. shifted toward strategic rivalry with China, Poland adopted a more cautious approach (Chrysosgelos, 2021). Thus, different countries have various approaches towards China, which reflect strategic interests and domestic political calculations.

EPRRPs' relationship with the United States is ambiguous. On the one hand, EPRRPs criticized American influence over Europe, especially its participation in NATO and its advocacy of liberal values like globalism and multiculturalism (Liang, 2016). These skeptics concur with their broader rejection of transatlantic liberalism and a more independent European foreign policy. On the other hand, EPRRPs found common ground with the Trump administration and shared their anti-globalist and nationalist rhetoric. Trump's "America First" approach and criticism toward multilateral institutions like the UN were interpreted as confirmed by European populists (Chrysosgelos, 2021). Trump's immigration policies and strict attitude toward China were admired by leaders like Orban and Salvini, who pointed out the possible cooperation between populist groups on both sides of the Atlantic (Mudde, 2017). However, Trump's withdrawal from Office has reemerged the tensions between EPRRPs and the US, as the Biden administration reemphasized liberal democratic norms and multilateralism. For instance, Orban has criticized the Biden administration's renewed emphasis on NATO as a platform of transatlantic cooperation and its support of progressive causes (Destradi & Plagemann, 2019). These findings imply that, disregarding their potential alignment with specific U.S.

administrations, EPRRPs' foreign policy stance consistently reflects their more considerable distrust of American dominance.

2.4. Highlighting the Debates

A central debate in the study of PRRPs is whether their foreign policies reflect coherent doctrines or are driven primarily by domestic political concerns. Scholars argue that while PRRPs often present themselves as champions of sovereignty and national interest, their foreign policy approaches frequently appear inconsistent, shaped more by domestic electoral considerations than strategic objectives. Wajner and Giurlando (2023) suggest that PRRPs lack long-term coherence in their foreign policies, often adapting their positions to align with prevailing public sentiment and maximize political gains at home. For instance, Matteo Salvini of Italy's Lega Nord shifted his stance on EU sanctions against Russia, balancing domestic economic concerns with broader nationalist rhetoric.

On the other hand, some researchers argue that PRRPs exhibit a degree of consistency rooted in ideological commitments to nationalism, anti-globalism, and Euroscepticism. Özdamar and Ceydilek (2020) demonstrate through operational code analysis that leaders like Marine Le Pen and Viktor Orbán maintain recurring themes of skepticism toward global governance, prioritization of state sovereignty, and resistance to multiculturalism with their hostile foreign policy beliefs. These consistent ideological threads provide a framework for understanding PRRP foreign policies, even as their practical applications may vary according to domestic political pressures.

Critics of the “reactionary” argument highlight that PRRPs’ foreign policies are not solely reactive but also shaped by a broader rejection of liberal internationalism and the norms associated with it. This ideological opposition can lead to calculated actions that appear opportunistic but are, in fact, part of a larger strategy to undermine globalist institutions (Cadier & Lequesne, 2020). For example, PRRPs’ advocacy for tighter national borders or their alignment with illiberal regimes like Russia and Turkey reflect a deliberate challenge to the liberal international order.

Nonetheless, the tension between doctrine and opportunism remains evident. Cadier and Lequesne (2020) note that PRRPs often emphasize reversing or dismantling policies implemented by mainstream governments rather than proposing comprehensive alternatives. This reactionary stance is particularly evident in their rhetoric, which frequently capitalizes on public discontent with migration or economic globalization. Such positions, while electorally advantageous, reveal the challenges PRRPs face in translating their ideological commitments into actionable and sustainable foreign policy frameworks.

Moreover, PRRPs’ reliance on domestic grievances to shape foreign policy can lead to contradictions when these grievances conflict with external realities. For instance, while promoting nationalist economic policies, PRRPs in trade-dependent countries often struggle to reconcile protectionist rhetoric with the need for international economic cooperation. This inconsistency highlights the pragmatic constraints that limit PRRPs’ ability to fully implement ideologically coherent foreign policies.

The debate ultimately underscores a duality in PRRPs’ foreign policy behavior: they are shaped by both ideological convictions and the need to remain electorally viable. Understanding this duality requires examining the interplay between domestic and

international pressures, as well as the extent to which populist leaders use foreign policy as a tool to consolidate their power and appeal to their constituencies. Future research could benefit from exploring this intersection further, focusing on comparative case studies to understand better how different domestic contexts influence the coherence and adaptability of PRRPs' foreign policy doctrines.

2.5.The Emotional Foundations of PRRPs

Recent studies have increasingly drawn attention to the emotional dimensions of support for populist radical right-wing parties (PRRPs), shifting focus away from purely structural explanations such as economic grievances or cultural backlash. Scholars argue that these parties do not simply reflect existing public discontent but play an active role in shaping and intensifying emotions to build political loyalty (Salmela & von Scheve, 2017). Emotions such as fear, resentment, anger, and shame play a central role in this process. Fear, for instance, is often linked to anxieties over immigration, globalization, and national identity. Yet, it is not necessarily those at the bottom of the economic hierarchy who are most affected; it is segments of the lower-middle class who perceive themselves as experiencing decline (Mudde, 2007; Balfour et al., 2016).

Some scholars have also explored how “ressentiment” refers to a deeper, more persistent psychological phenomenon characterized by feelings of helplessness and envy. This concept is different from resentment, which leads to confrontation or calls for justice. Ressentiment arises when people cannot publicly express or resolve their long-standing frustrations; instead, these feelings are internalized and directed toward scapegoated groups like immigrants, political elites, or international institutions (Salmela & von Scheve, 2017). In this sense, populist leaders use

ressentiment as a hidden emotional source to support victimhood and loss to consolidate support. This confirms Mudde's (2017) argument that populists do more than just address grievances; they also create and exaggerate them by using emotional rhetoric that portrays 'the people' as the legitimate victims of structural injustices.

Another recurring theme is the sense of betrayal, the belief that political elites have abandoned the interests of 'the people', fostering a widespread demand to reclaim national sovereignty and control (Giurlando, 2020; Chrysosgelos, 2021). Anger, moreover, is not simply reactive but serves as a powerful driver of political mobilization, particularly when nostalgic appeals accompany it to a glorified past (Moffitt, 2016; Drezner, 2017). These affective dynamics are reflected in the discourse of Turkey's Zafer Partisi, whose narratives of betrayal, anti-immigration stance, and calls for national revival mirror the emotional strategies used by EPRRPs. Examining the emotional underpinnings of populism in this setting, particularly from the perspective of resentment, provides essential insight into the party's ideological appeal and significance in contemporary Turkish society.

CHAPTER 3:

RESEARCH METHODS IN FOREIGN POLICY ANALYSIS

3.1. The Overview of Foreign Policy Analysis

Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), as a specialized branch within the broader International Relations (IR) discipline, formally began to take shape in the late 1950s and 1960s. Nonetheless, the essence of FPA, seeking to understand the rationale behind leaders' decisions in international affairs, has long existed among diplomats and scholars throughout history. According to Hudson (2007, p. 12), FPA is “the subfield of International Relations that seeks to explain foreign policy, or foreign policy behavior, concerning the theoretical ground of human decision makers, acting singly and in groups.” Before this period, dominant approaches to studying foreign policy primarily relied on system-level theories, often overlooking the psychological, cognitive, and social dimensions that influence policymakers' choices. Earlier analyses, especially those before the 1950s, were predominantly case-specific, narrow in scope, and primarily descriptive. As Levy (2003, p. 255) notes, such early studies were “more descriptive, policy driven, and interpretive rather than theoretical,” lacking the capacity to produce generalizable theoretical insights applicable across different cases and periods. In this setting, political leaders were viewed as merely extensions of the state apparatus, and the common

denominator “state interest” was the only thing that mattered. Within this framework, Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) gains significance in International Relations by emphasizing the central role of human decision makers, whether acting individually or collectively, in shaping international outcomes. Unlike systemic approaches, FPA centers its analysis on the individuals and groups responsible for foreign policy decisions. As a result, FPA encourages the development of actor-specific or actor-oriented theories, aiming to generate generalizable insights at the middle-range theory level (Rosenau, 1966, as cited in Hudson, 2005).

Following this trajectory, Hudson (2005; 2007) highlighted three foundational studies that significantly advanced the understanding of how decision-makers’ perceptions influence foreign policy behavior. The first was the work of Snyder, Bruck, and Sapin (1954; 1962), who positioned ‘decision making’ at the center of foreign policy analysis. They emphasized the importance of the decision maker’s worldview and political predispositions as key variables in the policy process (Walker et al., 1998, p. 175). Rather than focusing solely on outcomes, they underscored the importance of analyzing the policy-making process. Their approach operated below the level of the state, aiming to uncover the rationale behind specific policy choices and actions.

A decade later, Rosenau (1966) contributed to the field through his work on comparative foreign policy, which synthesized data across various levels of analysis to derive generalizable patterns applicable across different national contexts. Like Snyder and his colleagues, Rosenau differentiated between identifying relevant factors and assessing their actual influence. He advocated for a middle-range theoretical framework that accounted for the complexities and asymmetries between

abstract principles and real-world practice. His multilevel, multi-causal approach laid the groundwork for more nuanced and actor-centered explanations of foreign policy behavior.

Thirdly, Harold and Margaret Sprout's (1965) contributions further enriched the field by introducing the concept of the decision-maker's 'psycho-milieu', the psychological and environmental context through which individuals interpret and process information. They argue that it is not merely the objective environment but how decision-makers perceive and make sense of that environment that shapes policy outcomes.

These three studies marked critical turning points in the evolution of Foreign Policy Analysis. They redirected scholarly focus toward the decision-making process itself, emphasizing the role of psychological and contextual factors in shaping foreign policy. These works also helped to establish a comparative and multi-level analytical tradition. From this foundation, the field evolved along two primary paths: the Rational Actor Model (RAM), which became the mainstream approach, and a diverse array of alternative models developed in response to critiques of RAM's limitations.

3.2. Rational Actor Model

To begin with, the Rational Actor Model (RAM) has long been regarded as the dominant framework within the field of International Relations and a central tool in analyzing foreign policy decision-making. According to MacDonald (2003, p. 551), RAM is often considered "the most plausible candidate for a universal theory of political behavior," offering straightforward and seemingly logical assumptions that

aim to unify the various branches of political science. Nevertheless, rational choice approaches overlook individual decision makers' unique characteristics. Most scholars on decision-making processes adopt the rational actor assumption as their analytical starting point. This perspective is rooted in the realist school of thought, which conceptualizes states as coherent, unitary actors driven by the pursuit of power and security while seeking to avoid losses, particularly in an anarchic international system.

The decision-making framework presented by the Rational Actor Model (RAM) has traditionally treated states as 'black boxes,' where internal actors engage in basic calculations of utility in response to their external environment. This model assumes that decision-makers consistently apply the same logic of cost-benefit analysis across all situations, selecting the policy option that maximizes expected gains, rather than acting based on their personal beliefs or perceptions (De Mesquita, 1997; Fearon, 1998). This approach assumes uniformity in how decisions are made, sidelining individual variation. It was not until the work of Allison (1969) that this rational choice model was more formally structured. However, even in their formulation, the model left little room for psychological influences such as leaders' personalities, perceptual biases, flawed information processing, or misjudgments, all of which can significantly shape foreign policy decisions. This approach views foreign policy as a response to objective conditions, where specific situations are met with rational behavior. It assumes that when faced with various options, the decision-maker will choose the most logical one. Even though an individual's ability to act rationally may be limited by their surroundings or uneven access to information, they are still expected to follow a consistent set of preferences to achieve their goals. Building on the idea that other actors in the same environment are also rational, both rational

choice theory and the expected utility model argue that leaders are primarily motivated by the need to survive politically, a basic goal assumed to apply to all actors, across different contexts and periods (De Mesquita, 1997).

Despite its strengths, the rational choice paradigm has faced significant criticism for overlooking the role of individual leaders' personalities, cognitive biases, and political beliefs, actors that can meaningfully shape a state's foreign policy decisions and broader patterns in international relations. With this in mind, the following section explores the literature associated with the cognitive and psychological approaches within FPA, focusing on how these perspectives challenge the dominance of the Rational Actor Model (RAM).

3.3. Cognitive Approaches to the Study of Foreign Policy

The limitations of the Rational Actor Model (RAM) became more visible with the development of cognitive approaches in foreign policy analysis. Unlike RAM, which takes interests and decision-making as fixed, cognitive models focus on how decision-makers process information. These models critique RAM for its overly simplified assumptions, the biased tendency to interpret current situations through past experiences, emotional distortions, and a stronger focus on avoiding losses than achieving gains (Neack, 2003). Although the intersection of psychology and political studies goes back to the 1930s (Lasswell, 1930), more structured studies appeared in the 1970s with the cognitive revolution, which was based on the idea that human mental processes could be examined through formal models drawn from computer science (Jervis, 1976).

In line with this shift, Steinbruner (1974) emphasized the role of cognitive processes and how they interact with organizational structures. He argued that due to the uncertainty and complexity of international politics, RAM could not be applied universally, thereby increasing the relevance of the decision-maker. Similarly, Jervis (1976) highlighted human misperception and the impact of uneven information, stressing how cognitive and cultural filters affect leaders' judgment. He emphasized how perception shapes decisions and how misleading self-images and images of others affect policy choices. Based on the idea that misrecognition plays a fundamental role in human interaction (Lacan, 1997), Jervis argued that decision-makers rely on preexisting experiences and biases when dealing with imperfect information.

Khong (1992) also explored how analogies function in foreign policy decision-making. By comparing U.S. involvement in Vietnam with Britain's appeasement policy in the 1930s, he showed how leaders simplify complex decisions by applying historical analogies. These analogies, however, can lead to inconsistencies, as they filter new information through personal and historical experience. Khong pointed out that decision-makers often choose analogies that support their preferences, either due to a subconscious desire for cognitive consistency or deliberate political strategy (Khong, 1992, as quoted in Levy, 2003: 267).

This focus on preexisting beliefs and causal mechanisms is also reflected in the difference between cognitive models and RAM-based theories. While the latter treat beliefs as passive tools for interpreting information, cognitive approaches argue that beliefs can be independent causes of behavior (Walker and Schafer, 2006a, p. 5). In this view, beliefs influence how information is perceived and often become more

dominant when ambiguity increases, especially when new data does not align with the leader's beliefs.

Cognitive studies in foreign policy have produced various models that place different weights on concepts, perceptions, and outcomes. 'Cognitive mapping,' for example, aims to outline the conceptual structure behind a decision-maker's reasoning (Axelrod, 1976, p. 55), while 'image theory' explores how patterns in perception shape behavior (Cottam, 1977). Other approaches, such as 'conceptual complexity analysis' and 'operational code analysis,' have examined the influence of belief systems on foreign policy choices.

3.4. Leadership Studies in Foreign Policy Decision-Making

Alongside the growing influence of cognitive approaches, leadership studies based on 'at-a-distance' methodologies gained prominence (Winter & Stewart, 1977). These approaches focus on the personal characteristics of political leaders while addressing the challenge of limited direct access to them (Taber, 2000). Initially, psychobiography studies, which explored leaders' life histories through detailed single-case analyses, dominated the field. However, these were increasingly replaced by nomothetic methods and a shift toward quantitative research using at-a-distance techniques (Schafer, 2000). By analyzing written materials and applying content analysis, scholars were able to generate more generalizable insights and conduct cross-case comparisons. Leadership Trait Analysis (LTA) and operational code analysis (OCA) are the two most frequently used quantitative methods and have a broader range of applications in the foreign policy areas. While LTA concentrates on politically relevant personality traits and leadership characteristics, OCA focuses on the mechanism between a leader's beliefs and foreign policy decisions.

3.4.1. Leadership Trait Analysis (LTA)

Drawing on the works of Hermann (1976; 1978; 2003), Leadership Trait Analysis (LTA) was developed to understand leaders' traits and motivations by quantifying specific behavioral indicators. Rather than relying on qualitative assessments of biographical narratives, Hermann (1999) proposed a method to identify measurable patterns in how leaders respond to their political surroundings, process information, and pursue goals linked to ideology, causes, or relationships. This framework is based on seven core traits (Hermann, 1999, p. 10): (1) the belief that one can influence or control what happens, (2) the need for power and influence, (3) conceptual complexity (the ability to differentiate things and people in one's environment), (4) self-confidence, (5) the tendency to focus on problem solving and accomplishing something versus maintenance of the group and dealing with others' ideas and sensitivities, (6) an individual's general distrust or suspiciousness of others, and (7) the intensity with which a person holds an ingroup bias.

These traits help explain how leaders interpret their environments, motivate them, and approach decision-making. Hermann used both general and situational profiles to assess leadership behavior. The general profile shows how a leader fits into broader leadership typologies, while the contextualized profile reveals more individualized traits expressed in specific circumstances (Hermann, 1999, pp. 41–42). Together, these profiles provide a more complete understanding of leadership style, taking into account situational variation.

Initially reliant on manual coding, later LTA studies increasingly used automated techniques and expanded their empirical scope. The evolution of LTA also influenced the development of Operational Code Analysis (OCA), which similarly

explores leaders' belief systems. However, it differs methodologically by focusing on analyzing transitive verbs rather than all linguistic content.

3.4.2. Operational Code Analysis (OCA)

Nathan Leites first introduced Operational Code Analysis (OCA) in his works "The Operational Code of the Politburo" (1951) and "A Study of Bolshevism" (1953). Leites' research, which was carried out during the Cold War under the guidance of the RAND Corporation, intended to analyze the writings of Bolshevik elites to explain the decision-making reasoning behind Soviet leadership. Leites analyzed the ideologies of Lenin and Stalin to describe the Soviet Union's unstable relations and unusual bargaining behavior with the US leadership. He claimed that these ideologies had a significant influence on the thinking of other Soviet leaders and, as a result, shaped the Soviet Politburo's mode of operation, particularly in foreign policymaking (Young & Schafer, 1998; Walker & Schafer, 2010). According to his study, the Soviet leadership approached international relations strategically based on a set of fundamental political assumptions; he referred to this as a "code", a cognitive and motivational framework. It was the first systematic attempt to relate psychological and ideological factors to state behavior. However, in Leites' work, the different political ideas, regulations, and maxims connected to his "operational code" were not organized and synthesized. The order, hierarchy, and relationships between the different components of the "code" were not clarified adequately by him (George, 1969: 196). Besides that, his study was overly generalized because it only addressed Soviet ideology and assumed that all Politburo members followed the same strategic doctrines, treating operational code as inflexible and predetermined. This conceptual challenge of distinguishing between the beliefs of individual leaders

and the ideology of the group was later examined by researchers like George (1969) and Holsti (1977).

In a review paper, “The ‘operational code’: A neglected approach to the study of political leaders and decision-making,” by Alexander George (1969), reexamined Leites’ groundbreaking study of elite belief systems (cited by Walker, 1990: 404). George created two major categories of political beliefs that address the ten questions. First of all, the five philosophical beliefs allow researchers to emphasize how leaders view the political universe and the role of the “others” they interact with in this universe. The five instrumental beliefs that portray the “self” and provide a map of the means to the ends in line with the best possible strategy and tactics for achieving foreign policy objectives are included in this question set (George, 1969; Walker, 1990).

Together, these two belief systems explain the preferences and mindsets of decision makers for the creation of foreign policy (Schafer and Walker 2006). In other words, George (1969, p. 200) contends that these ten essential questions would capture a leader's fundamental attitude on the issue of leadership and action. The following table is a list of the 10 operational code research program questions (George 1969: 200):

	Philosophical Beliefs
P-1	What is the “essential” nature of political life? Is the political universe one of harmony or conflict? What is the fundamental character of one’s political opponents?
P-2	What are the prospects for the eventual realization of one’s fundamental political values and aspirations? Can one be optimistic or must one be pessimistic on this score, and in what respects the one and/or the other?
P-3	Is the political future predictable? In what sense and to what extent?
P-4	How much “control” or “mastery” can one have over historical development? What is one’s role in “moving” and “shaping” history in the desired direction?
P-5	What is the role of “chance” in human affairs and in historical development?
	Instrumental Beliefs
I-1	What is the best approach for selecting goals or objectives for political action?
I-2	How are the goals of action pursued most effectively?
I-3	How are the risks of political action calculated?
I-4	What is the best “timing” of action to advance one’s interests?
I-5	What is the utility and role of different means for advancing one’s interests?

Table 1. George’s Philosophical and Instrumental Beliefs (1969)

George (1969) underlined that leaders have distinct and dynamic operational codes that can change over time in reaction to shifting political circumstances. He proposed that belief systems could be tested and compared across leaders in opposition to Leites, who viewed the operational code as a set of ideological doctrine. He further contributed to the operational code approach by reconsidering the first two philosophical beliefs, “What are the sources of conflict?” and “What is the fundamental nature of the political universe?”, as “master beliefs.” (1969, p. 202).

These beliefs were the primary constraint on the leaders' belief systems and perceptions.

Holsti (1977) built on George's framework by answering his ten questions concerning philosophical and instrumental views to create a leadership typology based on leaders' operational codes. He made six types of opcodes (A, B, C, D, E, F), later Walker (1983; 1990) reduced it into four (A, B, C, DEF). Based on the nature (temporary or permanent) and cause (individual, society, or international system) of political conflict, Holsti's typology is derived from the "master beliefs," which are responses to the P-1, I-1, and P-4 questions. Table 2 represents Holsti's typology, revised by Walker, in detail:

TYPE A Settle> Deadlock > Dominate > Submit Philosophical: Conflict is temporary, caused by human misunderstanding and miscommunication. A ‘conflict spiral,’ based on misperception and impulsive responses, is the major danger of war. Opponents are often influenced in kind to conciliation and firmness. Optimism is warranted, based upon a leader’s ability and willingness to shape historical development. The future is relatively predictable, and control over it is possible. Instrumental: Establish goals within a framework that emphasizes shared interests. Pursue broadly international goals incrementally with flexible strategies that control risks by avoiding escalation and acting quickly when conciliation opportunities arise. Emphasize resources that establish a climate for negotiation and compromise and avoid the early use of force.	TYPE C Settle>Dominate>Deadlock>Submit Philosophical: Conflict is temporary; it is possible to restructure the state system to reflect the latent harmony of interests. The source of conflict is the anarchical state system, which permits a variety of causes to produce war. Opponents vary in nature, goals, and responses to conciliation and firmness. One should be pessimistic about goals unless the state system is changed, because predictability and control over historical development are low under anarchy. Instrumental: Establish optimal goals vigorously within a comprehensive framework. Pursue shared goals, but control risks by limiting means rather than ends. Act quickly when conciliation opportunities arise and delay escalatory actions whenever possible. Resources other than military capabilities are useful.
TYPE D-E-F Dominate>Settle>Deadlock>Submit Philosophical: Conflict is permanent, caused by human nature (D), nationalism (E), or international anarchy (F). Power disequilibria are major dangers of war. Opponents may vary, and responses to conciliation or firmness are uncertain. Optimism declines over the long run and in the short run depends upon the quality of leadership and a power equilibrium. Predictability is limited, as is control over historical development. Instrumental: Seek limited goals flexibly with moderate means. Use military force if the opponent and circumstances require it, but only as a final resource.	Type B Dominate>Deadlock>Settle>Submit Philosophical: Conflict is temporary, caused by warlike states; miscalculation and appeasement are the major causes of war. Opponents are rational and deterrable. Optimism is warranted regarding the realization of goals. The political future is relatively predictable, and control over historical development is possible. Instrumental: One should seek optimal goals vigorously within a comprehensive framework. Control risks by limiting means rather than ends. Any tactic and resource may be appropriate, including the use of force when it offers prospects for large gains with limited risks.

Table 2. The revised Holsti (1977) typology, adopted from Walker (1983; 1990)

(cited by Özdamar & Ceydilek, 2020, p. 142)

Types A and C are both associated with a cooperative view of the political universe, but they differ in how much control they believe they have over historical outcomes.

Type A leaders are idealists who perceive limited control over historical developments. In contrast, Type C leaders, who believe they can exert a higher degree of control, are described as ‘utopian reformers’—those who think substantial change is possible if enough influence is applied, though they are generally reluctant to use violent means (Walker & Schafer, 2007, p. 753). In contrast, Types B and DEF view the political environment through a more conflictual lens. Type B leaders believe in higher personal control and tend to adopt a revolutionary outlook. In contrast, Type DEF leaders, who perceive less control, align more closely with a moderate realist perspective, reflecting a more cautious and limited view of their influence over historical events.

The next significant advancement in operational code analysis was made by Walker, Schafer, and Young (1998), who developed quantitative content analysis methods to systematically measure leaders’ belief systems. Firstly, Walker et al., (1998) examined Jimmy Carter’s shift in political views in the late 1970s, developed a quantitative operational code research agenda and “at-a-distance” approach that “allowed for measurements of such things as the subject’s view of conflict propensities in the world and the utility of conflict as a means of policy by the subject himself” (Schafer, 2010). Walker et al. (1998) created an automated content analysis method called the “Verbs in Context System” (VICS). This system builds quantitative indices that align with the instrumental and philosophical ideas listed in Figure 2 below by concentrating on the verbs used in a leader’s public speeches and their attributions to the use of power by both the leader and others (Schafer and Walker, 2006). To identify the leader’s self- and other- images in one of the four quadrants, the VICS indices for the master beliefs – P-1 (nature of the political

universe), I-1 (strategic approach to goals), and P-4 (ability to control historical development)- are mapped on the vertical (P-1/I-1) and horizontal (P-4) axes in the Figure 1. Based on the positions for self (I-1, P-4a) and others (P-1, P-4b), strategic preferences regarding the objectives of dominate, settle, submit, and deadlock can be predicted (Walker & Schafer, 2006, cited by Özdamar, 2017, p. 174). Details on calculating VICS indices for the master beliefs are given below.



Table 3. The Verbs in Context System Indices for Beliefs in Leader's Operational

Code

	Elements	Index	Interpretation
P-1	Nature of the political universe (image of others)	%Positive minus %Negative Transitive Other Attributions	+1.0 friendly to -1.0 hostile
P-2	Realization of political values (optimism/ pessimism)	Mean Intensity of Transitive Other Attributions divided by 3	+1.0 optimistic to -1.0 pessimistic
P-3	Political future (predictability of others' tactics)	1 minus Index of Qualitative Variation for Other Attributions	1.0 predictable to 0.0uncertain
P-4	Historical development (Locus of control)	Self (P-4a) or Other (P-4b) Attributions divided by [Self plus Other Attributions]	1.0 high to 0.0 low self- control
P-5	Role of Chance (Absence of control)	1 minus [Political Future x Historical Development Index]	1.0 high role to 0.0 low role
I-1	Approach to goals (direction of strategy)	%Positive minus %Negative Self-Attributions	+1.0 high cooperation to -1.0 high conflict
I-2	Pursuit of goals (intensity of tactics)	Mean Intensity of Transitive Self-Attributions divided by 3	+1.0 high cooperation to -1.0 high conflict
I-3	Risk orientation (predictability of tactics)	1 minus Index of Qualitative Variation for Self-Attributions	1.0 risk acceptant to 0.0 risk averse
I-4	Timing of action (flexibility of tactics)	1 minus Absolute Value [%X Minus %Y Self Attributions]	1.0 high to 0.0 low shift propensity
	a. Coop vs. conf tactics	Where X = Coop and Y = Conf	
	b. Word vs. deed tactics	Where X = Word and Y = Deed	
I-5	Utility of means (exercise of power)	Percentages for Exercise of Power Categories a through f	+1.0 very frequent to 0.0 infrequent
	a. Reward	a's frequency divided by total	
	b. Promise	b's frequency divided by total	
	c. Appeal/ Support	c's frequency divided by total	
	d. Oppose/ Resist	d's frequency divided by total	
	e. Threaten	e's frequency divided by total	
	f. Punish	f's frequency divided by total	

Note. All indices vary between 0 and 1.0 except for P-1, P-2, I-1, and I-2, varying between -1.0 and +1.0. P-2 and I-2 are divided by 3 to standardize the range (Source: Walker, Schafer, and Young, 1998: 178- 182; cited by Özdamar, 2017, p. 175).

Starting with Leites (1951; 1953), the operational code approach has developed over the years. Before utilizing the VICS method, there are profiles of individuals and foreign policies, such as, Henry Kissinger (Walker, 1977); US presidents and secretaries of states (Walker & Falkowski, 1984); Woodrow Wilson (Walker, 1995); comparative study of Bush and Gorbachev (Winter et al., 1991). After the OCA approach utilizing the VICS method, it has broadened its scope to explore various possibilities, starting with the evolution of operational codes of the leader Jimmy Carter (Walker et al., 1998). It includes the studies on Vladimir Putin (Dyson, 2001; Dyson & Parent, 2018); George W. Bush (Robison, 2006; Renshon, 2009); Lyndon B. Johnson and his advisors (Walker and Schafer, 2000); John F. Kennedy's operational code comparisons of public vs. private beliefs (Renshon, 2009); Mao Zedong (Feng, 2005); both the Leadership Trait Analysis and OCA of Donald Trump (Özdamar et al., 2023); MENA Leaderships (Özdamar & Canbolat, 2018); It examined regional conflicts like Evo Morales and Chilean Bolivian rivalry (Thiers, 2021).

Comparative studies have also been conducted on how different leaders manage conflicts, including George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton (Schafer, Young, and Walker, 2002), Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson (Walker & Schafer, 2007), Tony Blair and Bill Clinton in connection to democratic peace (Walker and Schafer, 2006), Fidel Castro and Kim II Sung (Malici & Malici, 2005), Mahmoud

Ahmadinejad and Bashar al-Assad (Malici and Buckner 2008), Yitzhak Ranim and Shimon Peres (Crichlow, 1998), Bill Clinton and George W. Bush (O'Reilly, 2013), Reagan and Bush (Dille, 2000), George W. Bush and Barack Obama (Macdonald & Schneider, 2017), Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump (Walker, Schafer and Smith, 2018), and European populist radical right-wing leaders (Özdamar & Ceydilek, 2020).

There is a gap in the literature regarding Turkish leaders' operational codes. While Özdamar (2017) investigated Islamist leaders such as Necmettin Erbakan and neo-Islamist leaders like Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in comparison to Qaddafi, Khomeini, Ahmadinejad, and Meshal, few studies have focused on other Turkish political leaders. Alpay (2021) investigated Erdoğan's operational code separately. In the far-right literature of Turkey (Gül, 2022), the author compared two nationalist party tradition leaders, Alparslan Türkeş and Devlet Bahçeli. From this point on, this thesis aims to fill this gap by introducing the chairman of Zafer Partisi, Ümit Özdağ's operational code analysis.

CHAPTER 4:

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE ZAFER PARTİSİ (ZP) AND ITS LEADER ÜMİT ÖZDAĞ

4.1. Introduction

Moving forward to the methodological framework, the forthcoming section turns to the empirical investigation that forms the central pillar of this thesis. This study argues that the Zafer Partisi, which was founded in 2021 under the leadership of Ümit Özdağ, marks a pivotal moment in Turkish political history as the first unique instance of a European-type populist radical right-wing party. This characterization is not merely based on its anti-immigration stance, but also its broader strategic and ideational rupture with both the governing coalition and the established opposition. Unlike other nationalist actors in Turkish politics, the ZP articulates a political agenda that merges exclusionary ethno-nationalism with populist anti-elitism.

To support this claim, the analysis begins by exploring the party's founding moment, institutional path, and rising visibility in public debates, especially during the 2023 election period. Second, despite its growing importance, the ZP remains relatively understudied within Turkish academia. Therefore, this section also examines the limited but emerging body of literature addressing the party's discourse, strategies, and positioning. Third, particular attention will be paid to Ümit Özdağ, whose intellectual background and evolving ideological profile have played a formative role

in shaping the party's direction. Finally, in line with the methodological design, the section will present the findings of the operational code analysis conducted to decode Özdağ's foreign policy belief system. These findings will be evaluated in isolation and from a comparative perspective, assessing the extent to which the ZP's foreign policy preferences align with those of established PRRPs in Europe. In doing so, the section aims to test the central hypotheses and contribute to a more systematic understanding of the party's position within the broader populist radical right-wing party landscape.

4.2. Establishment and Importance of the Zafer Partisi (ZP)

Zafer Partisi represents a significant turning point in the landscape of Turkish party politics. As the first party to explicitly adopt a platform centered on exclusionary anti-immigrant discourse, it aligns itself ideologically with the family of European populist radical right parties (EPRRPs), such as France's National Rally (NR), Germany's Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD), and Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) (Akçay and Deniş, 2022, p. 31). The emergence of the ZP, however, is neither imitation nor derivative. Instead, it is a localization of PRRP strategies, resulting from Turkey's distinct institutional, political, and demographic circumstances.

This thesis focuses on the ZP for four interrelated reasons. First, it is the first political party in Turkey to centralize migration and demographic transformation as an existential political issue, effectively restructuring the political agenda around these concerns. Second, it differs from mainstream nationalist parties such as the Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (MHP, Nationalist Action Party) and İyi Parti (İYİP, GOOD Party) in

terms of ideology and operations. Third, the ZP provides an empirical opportunity to analyze the strategic worldview of a PRRP-like actor in a non-Western context.

Fourth, and maybe the most important, it represents a broader ideational shift of Turkish nationalism in the context of prolonged structural crises, shifting from state preservation and secular republicanism to populist, exclusionary, and culturally defensive narratives in the face of overlapping economic, demographic, and institutional crises (Türk, 2024; Özoflu et al., 2025; Secen et al., 2024).

On August 26, 2021, Ümit Özdağ, a politician with organizational and academic ties to Turkey's nationalist movement, founded the Zafer Partisi. Before the ZP's establishment, Özdağ was affiliated with the MHP and then the İYİP. He left the previous party after stating that it had deviated from its nationalist roots and failed to address the problem of mass migration properly. His new party sought to fill what he defined as a growing vacuum in Turkish politics: a nationalist, oppositional force centered on the theme of demographic threat. The party manifesto and program explained the ZP's primary texts, which describe the party's aims, foreign policy positions, and general stances. According to its program, the ZP emerged in response to a "serious and profound crisis" facing the Turkish nation, identifying the presence of millions of irregular migrants and asylum seekers as a deliberate demographic intervention by the state (Zafer Partisi Programı, 2021, pp. 24–26).

The ZP, in contrast to its predecessors in the Turkish nationalist tradition, combines an agenda against immigrants with a more comprehensive ideological critique of the current political system. By doing this, it presents itself not just as another nationalist party but also as a force for correction. This force intends to restore the Turkish people's authentic voice in opposition to corrupt elites and foreign pressures. For

instance, the ZP's manifesto, which criticizes the current framework as "ineffective and exhausting" and argues for the termination of the EU accession process in favor of a "new partnership model," further solidifies this divergence with other nationalist parties (Zafer Partisi Programı, 2021, p. 35). This Euroscepticism is noteworthy because even the MHP and other traditional nationalist groups in Turkey have always supported Turkey's Europeanization on a conditional basis. Given its strategic isolationism and cultural defensiveness, the ZP brings a new perspective on foreign policy to the Turkish political party spectrum.

Additionally, the ZP's foundation reflects a new paradigm in Turkish politics: it is neither a republican-secular party like the Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (CHP, Republican People's Party) nor a religious-conservative party like the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP, Justice and Development Party) (Çarkoğlu, 2024, pp. 166–167). It has a distinct position that combines anti-immigration, anti-globalism, and nationalism into a cohesive worldview that appeals to broader voters, especially the young urban voters who feel left out of both the mainstream Islamist and leftist currents. Thus, the ZP reflects an internal shift in Turkey's ideological landscape and a response to external factors like migration.

The ZP stands out primarily for its stance on redefining migration as a structural factor that causes Turkey's national instability rather than as a humanitarian or foreign policy issue. The party's focus on national decline and demographic threat, as reported in recent scholarly works, makes it a functional counterpart of the European extreme right in Turkey's hybrid political environment (Balta, Elçi, & Sert, 2022, pp. 6-12; Özoflu et al., 2025, p. 3). However, in contrast to its European predecessors,

which developed over many years of liberal-democratic institutionalization, the ZP quickly emerged in the vacuum created by a fragmented opposition and a politically exhausted electorate.

In this respect, the Zafer Partisi is more than just another political player competing for votes; it is a crucial case study that allows scholars to investigate how radical right-wing party tactics can be modified when liberal democracy is under pressure and institutions are contested. It is an example of how domestic players can adapt global ideological frameworks to fit local grievances, especially where migration is a daily and direct reality rather than a hypothetical issue.

4.3. The ZP's Role in 2023 Elections

During the May 2023 elections, the ZP's uncompromising anti-immigrant, populist nationalist agenda substantially increased its visibility in the national political agenda. The election occurred in a tense political environment, influenced by economic hardship and dissatisfaction with the government's response to the February earthquakes. While the main opposition parties formed the Nation Alliance, and the ruling bloc, the People's Alliance, expanded to include smaller conservative parties like the Yeniden Refah Partisi (YRP, New Welfare Party) and Hür Dava Partisi (HÜDAPAR, Free Cause Party), the Zafer Partisi chose not to join any coalition. Instead, it positioned itself as an independent and anti-system force that opposed both the government and the opposition (Çarkoğlu, 2024, pp. 162–163). Later, the ZP formed a new alliance called the ATA Alliance and proposed Sinan Oğan as a presidential candidate. The party focused almost entirely on the issue of immigration, which had become one of the most sensitive and divisive topics in the

country due to growing discomfort with the presence of Syrian refugees and other migrant groups (Balta, Elçi & Sert, 2022, p. 6).

One of the ZP's most influential moves was supporting the short film *Sessiz İstila 1* (Silent Invasion), which imagined a future where refugees outnumber Turks and take control of the country. This narrative, promoted by party leader Ümit Özdağ, was meant to create fear about losing Turkey's national identity and to show immigration as a serious threat (Türk, 2023, pp. 271–272). The party argued that migration was not only an economic or social issue but also a danger to national security. Using a populist language, it described “the people” as a group that must be protected from both migrants and the political elites who failed to act (Özoflu et al., 2025, pp. 2–3). Özdağ also used social media actively to share anti-refugee messages and present the ZP as the only political actor truly defending national interests (Mazlum, 2024, pp. 135–147). Although the party received only about 2.23% of the vote and did not enter parliament, its campaign pushed mainstream parties to adopt stricter views on immigration (Secen et al., 2024, pp. 421–422). Ideologically, the ZP followed the example of radical right-wing parties in Europe by combining ethnic nationalism with a populist political style, making it the first party in Turkey to consistently reflect this model (Akçay & Deniz, 2022, pp. 30–31).

A critical moment in the 2023 elections was the second round of the presidential race, which became necessary after no candidate won a majority in the first round. This happened because Sinan Oğan, the candidate of the ATA Alliance, received about 5.17% of the vote. His unexpected success prevented both Erdoğan and Kılıçdaroğlu from winning outright, making Oğan and the nationalist vote a deciding

factor in the runoff. As immigration had been the central issue for Oğan's campaign, the second round became something like a referendum on whether refugees should stay or be sent back (Çarkoğlu, 2024, p. 164; Secen et al., 2024, p. 421).

However, the ATA Alliance broke apart after the first round. Sinan Oğan announced his support for Erdoğan, saying this was necessary to ensure political stability and prevent the influence of the pro-Kurdish Halkların Demokratik Partisi (HDP, People's Democratic Party) (Mazlum, 2024, p. 166; Secen et al., 2024, p. 428).

Meanwhile, Ümit Özdağ took a different path. Without joining the Nation Alliance, he offered his support to Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, who was the head of CHP and the presidential candidate, on the condition that a strong repatriation policy would be implemented. This agreement was made public through a protocol stating that all irregular migrants would be returned within one year if Kılıçdaroğlu won (Mazlum, 2024, pp. 165–167). In this way, two different nationalist strategies appeared: Oğan chose to support the existing government, while Özdağ stayed outside of alliances but still shaped the political debate by demanding strict immigration policies. As a result, the second round was no longer just a competition between two candidates, it became a national decision about refugee policy. Erdoğan promised a more cautious and controlled return process, while Kılıçdaroğlu, under Özdağ's influence, supported a faster and more forceful plan (Özoflu et al., 2025; Secen et al., 2024). In this context, the Zafer Partisi shifted the focus of the presidential election, making migration one of the most important and symbolic issues of the entire campaign.

4.4. Presence of the ZP in Turkish Scholarly Works

Despite the ZP's growing prominence in Turkish political discourse, especially on issues related to migration, academic engagement with the party remains relatively limited. However, a modest yet expanding body of research is beginning to investigate its discursive strategies, ideological orientation, and political positioning. These studies variously classify the party as populist, radical right, or far right categories that carry significant theoretical implications. This literature review synthesizes the main academic contributions, evaluating how each conceptualizes the party's political identity and rhetorical strategies.

Türk (2024) offered a discourse-historical analysis of the ZP's framing of refugees and national identity. He situated the party within the framework of populist nationalism, arguing that the ZP constructed refugees as cultural and demographic threats, while also framing the Turkish elite as complicit in this threat. Although Türk did not explicitly use the term "radical right," he compared the ZP to parties such as the National Rally and Lega Nord, aligning it with the European populist radical right.

In a more explicit theoretical framing, Özoflu et al. (2025) defined the ZP as a populist radical right-wing formation that securitizes migration through alarmist discourse. Drawing on the concept of populist securitization, they argued that the party identifies the Turkish people as an endangered entity, framing migration as a threat to cultural survival and national sovereignty. This strategy, they contend, places the ZP firmly within the radical right tradition as outlined by Mudde, particularly due to its anti-elitist and nativist positioning, albeit within the limits of democratic competition (Özoflu et al., 2025).

Similarly, Akçay and Deniş (2022) argued that the ZP represents Turkey's first European-style radical right party. They highlighted the party's anti-immigrant rhetoric, ideological exclusivism, and populist tone, emphasizing its divergence from traditional nationalist parties such as the MHP. Although it shared cultural nationalist themes, the ZP is marked by a more confrontational and exclusionary agenda, which the authors regard as indicative of the European radical right-wing model (Akçay & Deniş, 2022)

This typological framing is reinforced by Balta, Elçi, and Sert (2022), who present the ZP as a paradigmatic case of the populist radical right in Turkey. Their empirical work shows that the party successfully transformed diffuse anti-refugee sentiment into a coherent and mobilizing political agenda. Through securitized narratives and accusations of elite betrayal, the ZP crafted a unifying message around cultural and demographic preservation (Balta et al., 2022).

Echoing this assessment, Secen, Al, and Arslan (2024) identify the ZP as distinct from other nationalist parties, particularly the İyi Parti and MHP, due to its unequivocal emphasis on refugee repatriation and its ideologically rigid stance. While avoiding labels such as "far right," they affirm that the ZP fits within the European populist radical right family, particularly for its use of moral dualism, anti-elite discourse, and anti-immigration policy advocacy (Secen et al., 2024, p. 425).

Although not explicitly labeled, the ideological content of the ZP is also apparent in Mazlum's (2024) critical discourse analysis of its campaign communications. He

identifies recurring themes of national betrayal, cultural purity, and a civilizational struggle, which resonate strongly with European populist radical right parties. His work demonstrates how the party uses emotive symbols and slogans to invoke a threatened national essence (Mazlum, 2024). In a broader electoral analysis, Çarkoğlu (2024) acknowledges the ZP's growing influence, particularly among younger voters, attributing this rise to its focus on anti-Syrian sentiment. While he does not assign a precise ideological label, his commentary suggests that the party's ascendance is driven by issue-specific salience rather than a wholesale rejection of the political system (Çarkoğlu, 2024).

Other scholars focus more directly on the rhetorical tools employed by the party. For example, Deniz and Kargın (2022) trace the rise of anti-refugee discourse on Twitter and identify the ZP's digital strategy as central to spreading messages associating Syrians with crime, demographic threat, and cultural decay. Although the study is empirical rather than theoretical, it illustrates the party's alignment with radical right communication patterns (Deniz & Kargın, 2022).

Pınarbaşı (2023), through a comparative analysis of nationalist leaders, shows that Ümit Özdağ's discourse departs from that of Devlet Bahçeli, who is the head of MHP, and Meral Akşener, who was a member of parliament at MHP, then splintered and constituted İYİ Parti, by incorporating explicit hate speech against Syrians. While avoiding rigid typological classifications, the study reveals that Özdağ's rhetoric escalates over time to include narratives of criminality, terrorism, and societal collapse, thereby aligning discursively with the exclusionary impulses of the radical or far right (Pınarbaşı, 2023).

In sum, the existing literature, though still developing, essentially converges on the view that the Victory Party occupies a space within the populist radical right tradition. Scholars agree that the party combines nativist, authoritarian, and populist elements, while remaining within the framework of electoral politics. Where disagreement or ambiguity arises, it concerns whether the party should be further categorized as far right—a more expansive and sometimes politicized label—or whether it should remain analytically situated within the more precise contours of the radical right. Despite terminological variation, what remains consistent is the recognition of the ZP as a unique actor in Turkish politics: one that has institutionalized exclusionary nationalism and constructed migration as a master frame for mobilization and differentiation. In this thesis, I argue that the ZP is a Populist Radical Right-Wing Party (PRRP), in line with the typology proposed by Mudde (2007) and applied in recent analyses of the Turkish context (Secen et al., 2024). The party's platform combines nativism, authoritarianism, and populism: it constructs the Turkish nation as an ethnically homogeneous people whose survival is threatened by migrants and elites; it advocates rigid policy measures, including forced deportation and border militarization; and it opposes both the ruling elite and mainstream opposition for allegedly betraying national interests.

4.5. Ümit Özdağ and Political Leadership

Ümit Özdağ's father, Muzaffer Özdağ, was a prominent member of the National Unity Committee (NUC, Milli Birlik Komitesi), which seized power following the 1960 military coup in Turkey. Internal ideological disagreements soon emerged within the committee, leading to the formation of rival factions. Broadly speaking, the NUC split into two camps: one advocating for a swift return to civilian rule through elections and another favoring continued military governance. The latter

group, led by Alparslan Türkeş, sought to persuade the committee to retain control. At the same time, the former, under the leadership of Cemal Madanoğlu, supported holding a referendum and transferring power to civilians as quickly as possible. Türkeş and his followers opposed this plan, fearing that the Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (CHP) might return to power under such conditions. Although Muzaffer Özdağ initially supported Türkeş's position, he and thirteen others, later referred to as the “Fourteen”, were ultimately sent abroad, due to the concerns related to the interest of national stability (Tatlisu, 2021).

Ümit Özdağ was born on March 3, 1961, in Tokyo, Japan, a result of his father's political exile following the 1960 military coup in Turkey.¹ The family returned to Turkey at the end of 1963, where Özdağ spent the remainder of his childhood. He began his education at TED Ankara College but was expelled in his final year due to his nationalist activism, subsequently earning his high school diploma from Aktepe High School. Between 1980 and 1986, he studied political science and philosophy at Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich. His master's thesis addressed Turkey's planned development and the institutional role of the State Planning Organization.

Upon returning to Turkey, Özdağ began his academic career as a research assistant at Gazi University in 1986. He completed his PhD in 1990 with a dissertation on military-political relations during the early Republican period, and in 1993 became

¹ *The following biographical account is based on information provided on the official website of the Zafer Partisi where a dedicated section outlines the life and career of its founding leader, Prof. Dr. Ümit Özdağ.*

an associate professor with a study on the Menderes era and the 1960 coup. Over the years, he became a prominent scholar in national security, intelligence studies, and foreign policy analysis, holding positions at various institutions, including military academies and public policy bodies. His academic contributions include 28 authored books, 11 edited volumes, and more than 300 published articles, with a notable presence in Turkish strategic studies. Fluent in both English and German, he has lectured internationally and taken part in numerous academic forums around the world.²

Özdağ's political engagement began early, and he was involved in nationalist organizations during his youth. In the 1990s, he trained nationalist cadres under Alparslan Türkeş's direction. His formal political entry came in 2003 when he announced his candidacy for the MHP leadership, though internal opposition led to his expulsion. He was later reinstated, elected to parliament in 2015, and briefly served as the party's vice chair before being expelled again in 2016 due to persistent ideological clashes. After leaving the MHP, he co-founded the "Turkish Nationalists Say No" platform ahead of the 2017 constitutional referendum and later joined the founding ranks of the İYİ Party. However, disagreements over policy direction, particularly regarding immigration and the party's move toward centrist coalitions, led to his resignation in 2021. That same year, he launched the Ayyıldız Movement, and on August 26, he formally established the Zafer Partisi with 194 founding members.

The intellectual and political growth of the ZP's leader, Ümit Özdağ, is crucial to comprehending the party's formation and direction. A bridge between academia and

² <https://www.zaferpartisi.org.tr/ozgecmis-1/>

politics, Özdağ has played a significant role in redefining Turkish nationalist ideology, moving it away from bureaucratic traditionalism and toward a confrontational, identity-political, policy-driven nationalism. In the face of a divided opposition, his leadership is fundamental and defining, establishing the party's strategic aims and ideological direction.

Within the MHP, his insistence on ideological consistency clashed with the party leadership's pragmatism, especially its alignment with the ruling AKP. These tensions ultimately led to his departure. A similar pattern followed in the İYİ Party, where his calls for a firm nationalist stance on migration and identity politics were at odds with the party's coalition-based approach.

The Zafer Partisi emerged from this ideological cleavage, not just as a splinter faction seeking short-term gains, but as the institutional embodiment of Özdağ's long-standing strategic vision. The party's foundational texts—its 2021 program and 2023 manifesto, clearly reflect this orientation. They emphasize national self-reliance, cultural boundaries, and population management (Zafer Partisi Programı, 2021, pp. 13–35). The party's stance on refugee repatriation, critique of EU norms, and alternative foreign policy proposals all reflect Özdağ's belief in a self-sufficient and sovereign Turkish state.

As Özoflu et al. (2025) observed, the Zafer Partisi distinguishes itself in the Turkish political landscape by pairing populist rhetoric with an ideologically coherent agenda. Despite lacking deep organizational roots or a large electoral machine, the party benefits from Özdağ's media visibility and intellectual capital. His participation in policy forums and television debates has helped position the party as a serious opponent in shaping public opinion. Viewed more broadly, Özdağ represents a

distinct archetype of political actor in contemporary Turkey, one who bypasses both Islamist and Kemalist orthodoxies in favor of nationalism that is exclusionary in tone but reformist in method. This synthesis appeals particularly to politically alienated youth and urban nationalist voters who feel left out of both government and mainstream opposition narratives (Secen et al., 2024).

In this thesis, I argue that the Zafer Partisi exemplifies a populist radical right-wing party (PRRP) within the Turkish political landscape. This argument is based on several interrelated characteristics that correspond closely with the core dimensions of PRRPs as outlined in the literature review. To begin with, the party advances a pronounced nativist ideology, constructing immigrants, especially Syrian refugees, not as a temporary challenge but as fundamental threats to Turkey's cultural and demographic structure. This narrative is symbolic of the ethno-nationalist rhetoric employed by EPRRPs, in which immigration is treated as a civilizational fault line. Additionally, the ZP's populist discourse positions "the people" as a morally pure and cohesive group betrayed by a self-serving elite. Within this framework, Ümit Özdağ presents himself as the sole legitimate voice of national sovereignty, standing against both the ruling power and the opposition. The party relies on emotionally charged, fear-based communication strategies, particularly through social media, to amplify cultural and demographic erosion narratives, as vividly illustrated in the short film *Sessiz İstila*.

Given these characteristics, nativism, populism, and authoritarianism, I argue that the Zafer Partisi aligns closely with the PRRP model as theorized by Mudde (2007).

What makes the ZP particularly noteworthy is not only the substance of its ideology but also its internal consistency. Unlike many populist actors who rely heavily on the

charisma of a single leader or capitalize on short-term grievances, the ZP operates within a systematically developed ideological framework. While Özdağ remains central to the party's visibility, the movement is sustained by a longer-term intellectual and strategic vision, developed over years of academic and political engagement. This distinguishes the ZP as more than an opportunistic movement; it represents an ideologically coherent and deliberate political project.

Beyond these domestic concerns, the party's approach to foreign policy further reinforces its placement within the PRRP family, which this thesis's methodology of operational code analysis proved. Characterized by Eurosceptic and nationalist orientation, the ZP rejects full integration into supranational structures such as the EU and instead advocates for a more transactional, sovereignty-first approach to diplomacy. The following section will investigate research design following ideological structure through operational code analysis of Ümit Özdağ's foreign policy beliefs. By systematically analyzing his strategic preferences and belief system, I aim to contribute to the literature on how this broader ideological orientation translates into specific foreign policy actions.

CHAPTER 5:

RESEARCH DESIGN

5.1. Introduction

This thesis is grounded in the notion that leaders are central to decision-making processes and international politics. Consequently, gaining insight into a leader's foreign policy choices requires understanding their belief systems. These belief systems guide leaders in navigating political contexts and influence how they perceive and react to various situations. In line with this perspective, the study employs operational code analysis to examine the foreign policy beliefs of Ümit Özdağ, the first leader classified under the populist radical right-wing party (PRRP) type in Turkey.

This chapter introduces the research puzzle and the questions it has generated. It then outlines the research design and methodology, with a particular focus on how the VICS framework is operationalized, the implementation of ProfilerPlus and its Turkish version, and the suitability of this tool for quantitative analysis (Özdamar, Canbolat, and Young, 2020). The chapter presents the study's hypotheses and explains the rationale behind the case selection. It also provides a detailed account of

the data selection process, including the criteria for choosing speeches and the different analytical domains examined in the research.

5.2. Research Puzzle and Research Questions

The central puzzle that motivated this study arises from the effort to uncover the belief systems of populist radical right-wing leaders in foreign policy. Aiming to explore how these leaders perceive and engage with the ‘other’ in international politics, and the tools and strategies they employ in response, this thesis seeks to illuminate their decision-making processes and foreign policy preferences. The focus of the study is on Ümit Özdağ, the leader of the Zafer Partisi, who also has a political background in other nationalist parties within Turkey, including the Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (MHP) and the İYİ Party. In this regard, the main research question is

Does the Victory Party, as the only PRRP representative in Turkey, align with the foreign policy beliefs observed among EPRRPs?

To investigate, this thesis poses two related sub-questions

- 1. What are the philosophical and instrumental beliefs of Ümit Özdağ, as revealed through operational code analysis?*
- 2. Do these belief patterns demonstrate a resemblance or difference to the foreign policy profiles of EPRRP leaders?*

5.3. Research Design and Methodology

With the aim of finding answers to these research questions, in this thesis, I examine selected speeches of Ümit Özdağ using the ProfilerPlus software, which codes the verbs in speeches to explain a leader’s self-other assessment and control over political events in foreign policy preferences. This automated content analysis

technique, which is part of the Verbs in Context System (VICS), codes the verbs used in the speeches to identify belief constructions.

To answer the research questions, in this thesis, I use operational code analysis to examine the belief systems of Ümit Özdağ, a populist radical right-wing leader.

Using selected speeches, the study applies ProfilerPlus, an automated content analysis tool within the Verbs in Context System (VICS), which codes transitive verbs to assess a leader's perceptions of self versus others and their sense of control over political events.

While this method allows for a structured understanding of foreign policy preferences, it does not suggest a direct causal link between every policy decision and a leader's beliefs. Other actors, institutional dynamics, and contextual factors inevitably influence outcomes. Nonetheless, the importance of individual agency remains significant, especially in ambiguous or complex environments, making belief systems a valuable lens for anticipating foreign policy behavior.

5.3.1. ProfilerPlus and VICS

The primary analytical tool employed in this study is the Verbs in Context System (VICS), which derives insights from leaders' public statements by coding transitive verbs to identify their belief patterns. VICS follows a bottom-up methodology, allowing for predictions based on how leaders express control, promise threat, and cooperation through their language. While the framework of VICS was discussed in detail in the research design, this section serves as a brief recapitulation. It introduces the Turkish version of the ProfilerPlus software used in this thesis.

ProfilerPlus facilitates the automated identification and categorization of language by applying a series of steps: “tag and retrieve” for key terms, frequency analysis to determine importance, concept coding, and information extraction (Hudson, 2007). It assigns values ranging from -3 to +3 to assess the intensity of threats or promises, offering quantifiable outputs that enable cross-case comparisons.

This thesis utilizes the Turkish version of ProfilerPlus, developed by Özdamar, Canbolat, and Young in 2020. They note: “Because individuals and their leadership style matter in Turkish politics, a nuanced and scientific explanation of Turkey’s foreign and domestic policymaking requires a systematic approach to leadership analysis. We contribute to efforts in broadening the scope of FPA by creating a Turkish coding scheme for operational code analysis (OCA).” (Brummer et al., p. 8)

Despite Turkish's structural and semantic challenges, such as its agglutinative grammar and culturally embedded expressions, the language also offers valuable advantages. It allows for analyzing speeches in their original form without the distortions that can arise from translation. This study, therefore, contributes to the understanding of Ümit Özdağ’s foreign policy beliefs and the broader application and advancement of Turkish-language operational code analysis in political research.

5.3.2. Temporal and Spatial Domains

The temporal domain of this study begins with the founding of the Zafer Partisi in 2021. From that point onward, it focuses exclusively on the speeches and public statements of its leader, Ümit Özdağ. Although Özdağ had an active political career as a member of the MHP and later the splinter İYİ Parti, this research is specifically

concerned with the period in which he led the Zafer Partisi, as it marks a distinct phase in both his political identity and foreign policy discourse.

The spatial domain of this study is limited to the Republic of Turkey. In addition to contributing to the growing body of non-Western research on operational code analysis, several factors support the selection of the Turkish context. These include the linguistic advantages offered by conducting research in Turkish, the traditionally long political careers of Turkish leaders, the strong emphasis on individual leadership in policymaking, and the highly politicized character of Turkish society.

5.3.3. Data, Variables, and Hypotheses

In accordance with the guidelines outlined by Walker et al. (1998), the selection of speeches for coding was based on their political content, with a particular focus on foreign policy, and on the inclusion of language reflecting cooperation and/or conflict in terms of both words and actions. The selection process did not aim to collect mutually reinforcing statements to prevent subjective sampling bias. Instead, any speech that met the outlined criteria, regardless of its specific content, was included in the dataset. Notably, the analysis relied on prepared texts rather than spontaneous remarks. Although off-the-cuff statements may appear more candid and less calculated, they often fail to represent the official political direction that a leader intends to pursue through their party platform.

Given that Ümit Özdağ has operated from an opposition position and lacked the visibility afforded by mainstream media access, the availability of his public statements is significantly more limited than that of prominent government figures such as President Erdoğan. This constraint heavily influenced the data collection

process. As a result, the speeches analyzed in this study were primarily drawn from press conferences, interviews posted on his YouTube channels, and social media platforms, particularly X (formerly Twitter) (See Appendix 1 for speeches).

Moreover, due to Özdağ's arrest on January 21, 2025, it was not possible to include any material from the beginning of that year onward. This arrest is due to his statements at the Zafer Partisi Antalya Provincial Chairmen's Consultation Meeting held on January 19. Özdağ said, "No crusade could make the Turkish nation deist, atheist, or Christian. During Erdoğan's term, large segments of the Turkish nation began to lose interest in their religion due to those who deceived Allah, and during Erdoğan's term, the rate of deists and atheists exceeded 16 percent... Erdoğan is harming the faith of the Turkish nation by dividing the state of the Turkish nation among religious orders and communities, making polytheists a partner in the state, and destroying the culture of the Turkish nation by bringing millions of refugees and fugitives into Anatolia. What is actually happening is AKP fascism" (BBC News, 2025). During this speech, he was detained while having dinner in Ankara on Monday evening, January 20, then taken to İstanbul to testify. He was referred to court with a request for arrest on charges of "inciting the public to hatred and hostility" and "insulting the president." These limitations make the careful selection and analysis of the available speeches, within the established temporal scope, more critical for ensuring the validity and reliability of the study.

The dependent variable of this study is the foreign policy behavior of the ZP, and the independent variable is Ümit Özdağ's operational code. Alignment of his foreign policy behavior with other EPRRP leaders is the descriptive part of my thesis. This study begins by deriving hypotheses from existing operational code literature and

applying them to the data collected from Ümit Özdağ. Building on the research questions, I formulated three hypotheses regarding the master beliefs (P-1, P-4, and I-1).

While EPRRP leaders generally view the world as an arena of power struggles, where sovereignty is challenged by supranational entities, immigration, and foreign elites (Özdamar & Ceydilek, 2020), Özdağ's rhetoric suggests an even greater sense of hostility in international affairs. His heightened focus on security threats, particularly regarding migrants, Western intervention, and regional rivalries, will likely translate into a higher P-1 score than his European counterparts. Unlike EPRRP leaders, who sometimes engage in pragmatic foreign relations, Özdağ frames Turkey's foreign policy in more hostile terms, reinforcing a deeply conflictual worldview. Therefore, I hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 1. Ümit Özdağ is expected to perceive the political universe as more conflictual compared to the average European populist radical right-wing (EPRRP) leader, exhibiting a stronger belief that international relations are primarily shaped by conflict.

While EPRR leaders are typically skeptical of international institutions like the EU and NATO, they often maintain pragmatic bilateral engagements, such as strengthening ties with Russia or forming selective alliances with other nationalist movements (Özdamar & Ceydilek, 2020). Despite their Euroscepticism, leaders like Salvini and Orbán still engage with European institutions when beneficial. In contrast, Özdağ's anti-globalist stance, strong opposition to EU membership, and

overall skepticism toward Western alliances suggest that he may advocate for an even lower level of international cooperation than his European counterparts. If his I-1 score is lower than that of EPRR leaders, it would indicate a strong rejection of multilateral diplomacy, favoring a self-sufficient, nationalist, and sovereignty-first foreign policy approach. Therefore, my second hypothesis is formulated as follows:

Hypothesis 2. Ümit Özdağ is expected to demonstrate less inclination to cooperate on foreign policy compared to European populist radical right-wing leaders

Although EPRR leaders frequently critique external pressures on their states, they still tend to portray their nations as having the capacity to resist and reshape global dynamics. For instance, figures like Marine Le Pen or Viktor Orbán argue that their countries can push back against EU dominance or realign Europe's political landscape (Özdamar & Ceydilek, 2020). In contrast, Özdağ's discourse often frames Turkey as being constrained by external forces, including Western economic influence, international organizations, and geopolitical adversaries. If his P-4 score is lower than that of EPRR leaders, it would indicate that he sees Turkey as reacting to global developments rather than actively shaping them, reinforcing a nationalist defensive posture rather than an assertive revisionist strategy. Therefore, my final hypothesis is:

Hypothesis 3. Ümit Özdağ is likely to perceive himself as having less influence over historical development than EPRRP leaders do over their respective nations, leading to a more defensive and reactive foreign policy orientation.

5.4. Conclusion

While it is recognized that a leader's belief system does not solely determine foreign policy decisions, it remains a significant factor influencing their overall policy orientation, alongside various external dynamics. Understanding a leader's beliefs offers a meaningful foundation for making informed assessments about their foreign policy behavior. This study aims to map the belief system of Ümit Özdağ, the first populist radical right-wing leader in Turkey, by calculating his operational codes using an automated content analysis tool. The research further interprets these quantified scores about key foreign policy developments and compares Özdağ's belief profile with those of his European counterparts.

CHAPTER 6:

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

6.1. Introduction

This chapter presents operational code results of Ümit Özdağ and aims to answer the research questions mentioned in previous sections. Firstly, the chapter begins with the belief scores of Özdağ and then builds on interpretation. Secondly, I will compare Özdağ's operational code results with those of the other EPRRP leaders analyzed by Özdamar and Ceydilek (2020). Through comparative research, I would like to show where Özdağ, as Turkey's first populist radical right-wing representative leader, shares similarities or differences with his European counterparts.

6.2. Results: The Belief System of Ümit Özdağ and his Leadership Typology

Ümit Özdağ is a hardliner figure in Turkish politics and does not regularly appear in mainstream media outlets like many other opposition leaders; because of that, his foreign policy speeches are relatively limited. Due to the limited availability of consistent foreign policy content, 10,660 words were compiled and analyzed as a single aggregated document. This format allowed for a systematic operational code analysis, even though the structure of the source material differs from more formal or

high-profile political speeches. The results of Özdağ's master belief scores, based on this document, are shown in the table below (Levine and Young, 2014).

Master Belief	Ümit Özdağ
P-1	-0, 2857
P-4a	0, 3333
P-4b	0, 6667
I-1	0, 1429

Table 4. Master Belief Scores of Ümit Özdağ

Ümit Özdağ's master belief profile, comprised of his P-1, P-4, and I-1 scores, shows an organized worldview characterized by a tactical tendency for confrontation, systemic mistrust, and moderate confidence in political agency. His strong perception that the political universe is hostile and conflictual is demonstrated by his P-1 score of (-0, 285). The P-1 score of Özdağ indicates that he is predisposed to interpret the political universe with skepticism, assuming other actors are inclined toward opposition. He views international relations as competitive and marked by limited trust, though not to the extent of adopting an explicitly aggressive or revisionist stance. Regarding the image of the other, the P-4b (1-P4a) scores reflect a higher degree of control attribution (P-4b = 0,666), reflecting a high-medium degree of control over the course of history.

Regarding the self-image on historical development, I find the P4-a score of Özdağ (0,333) as 'low-medium control'. This indicates a moderate belief in the power of political actors to influence historical outcomes. While this does not imply unbounded agency, it does express a belief that even in dangerous situations, political skill, strong leadership, and immediate action may change the course of

events. The central idea of Özdağ's larger political stance is his belief in conditional but significant agency, since his nationalist-populist rhetoric is strongly linked to claims of sovereignty, control, and historical redirection. Instead, viewing history as being determined by impersonal processes outside the control of leadership, he sees himself as a possible corrective force in a world that is thought to be essentially broken. He maintains the ideational coherence of a populist realist agenda by using this moderate control belief to balance an aspirational claim to domestic and international transformation with a pessimistic view of the political universe.

Lastly, his I-1 score of 0, 142 confirms that a confrontational strategic approach is the best course of action. This score represents a strategic perspective that emphasizes pressure, conflict, and unilateral action more than compromise, consensus-building, or negotiation. The low score on this dimension indicates that Özdağ does not think using cooperative tactics to further political goals is desirable or beneficial. Instead, it seems that his strategic calculation is based on the conviction that political objectives are attained by assertive self-assertion rather than by alignment with others, which frequently entails the marginalization or outright rejection of respondents who are not regarded as legitimate or trustworthy. This form of conflict-weighted pragmatism implies that dominance and a persuasive demonstration of resolution, rather than persuasion or coalition building, define the path to influence for Özdağ.

Taken together, these three indices present a leader who sees the political world as threatening, controllable to an extent, and most effectively engaged through assertive and direct measures. Özdağ's operational code is ideologically coherent, with a realist-populist orientation that rejects optimism. He envisions a political

transformation as possible, but only through decisive leadership isolated from naive expectations of international harmony. His belief system supports a foreign policy orientation marked by securitization, autonomy, and suspicion—attributes typical of populist radical right-wing leaders.

6.3. Comparing Ümit Özdağ with EPRRP Leaders

After introducing and analyzing Özdağ's scores, I would like to compare him with the EPRRP average. In Table 5 below, you can see the relevant operational code scores.



	Norming Group (Malici & Malici, 2005)	Average EPRRP Leader (Özdamar & Ceydilek, 2020)	Ümit Özdağ
Philosophical Beliefs	n=164	n=95	n=1
P-1	0,30	0,23	-0,28
P-2	0,15	0,07	-0,42
P-3	0,13	0,37	0,27
P-4	0,22	0,37	0,33
P-5	0,97	0,84	0,90
Instrumental Beliefs			
I-1	0,40	0,42	0,14
I-2	0,18	0,19	-0,23
I-3	0,33	0,38	0,41
I-4			
a. Conflict	0,50	0,52	0,85
b. Words/deed	0,46	0,42	0,95
I-5			
a. Reward	0,16	0,16	0
b. Promise	0,08	0,03	0
c. Appeal/ support	0,47	0,50	0,57
d. Oppose/ resist	0,15	0,17	0
e. Threaten	0,03	0,02	0
f. Punish	0,11	0,10	0,42

Table 5. Operational code results of norming group, EPRRP leaders, and Özdağ (values of the norming group and EPRRP leaders are taken from Özdamar & Ceydilek, 2020).

When I compare Özdağ's scores with average EPRRP leaders, which consist of seven leaders, namely, Marine Le Pen, Viktor Orbán, Geert Wilders, Nigel Farage, Jimmie Akesson, Frauke Petry, and Norbert Hofer, especially the difference in the P-1 score caught my attention. While the average EPRRP leaders' P-1 score is 0,23, Özdağ's score is -0,28. This result reflects his strong perception of a hostile and conflictual political universe. Özdağ's P4a score is 0,33, slightly lower than the average (0,37), which suggests that he places less emphasis on his ability to shape political outcomes. His P4b scores (1-P4a) are very close (0,67) to those of his counterparts (0,63), which tells us that in the other attributions, he shares similarities with his European counterparts. For the I-1 scores, Özdağ's score is (0,14), whereas the EPRRP average is (0,42), which can be interpreted as his limited strategic cooperation regarding his self-approach to goals.

According to these results, in line with my expectation for the first hypothesis, which expected Özdağ's political universe to be more conflictual than the average EPRRP leader, is supported. As discussed, his score on P1 is -0,28 while the average EPRRP is 0,23. The second hypothesis, for the I1 score, suggested a lesser inclination to cooperate and approach goals compared to the EPRRP leader, which again supported, since Özdağ's I1 score is 0,14, whereas his counterparts are 0,42. Lastly, as suggested in hypothesis three, Özdağ's P4 (0,33) scores are slightly less influential

over global affairs than his counterparts (0,37), so the last hypothesis is supported too.

To make a more detailed comment, Figures 1 and 2 below show seven EPRRP leaders' self and other belief scores with a visual representation.

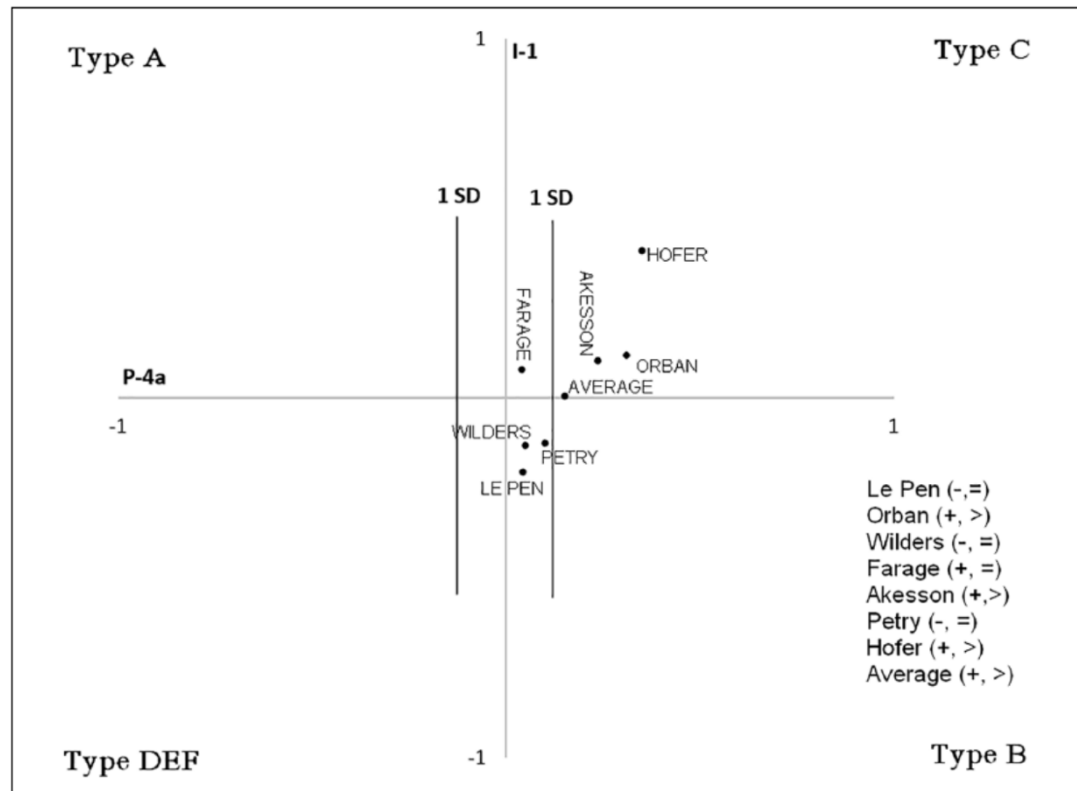


Figure 1. EPRRP leaders' self's location from the norming group mean.

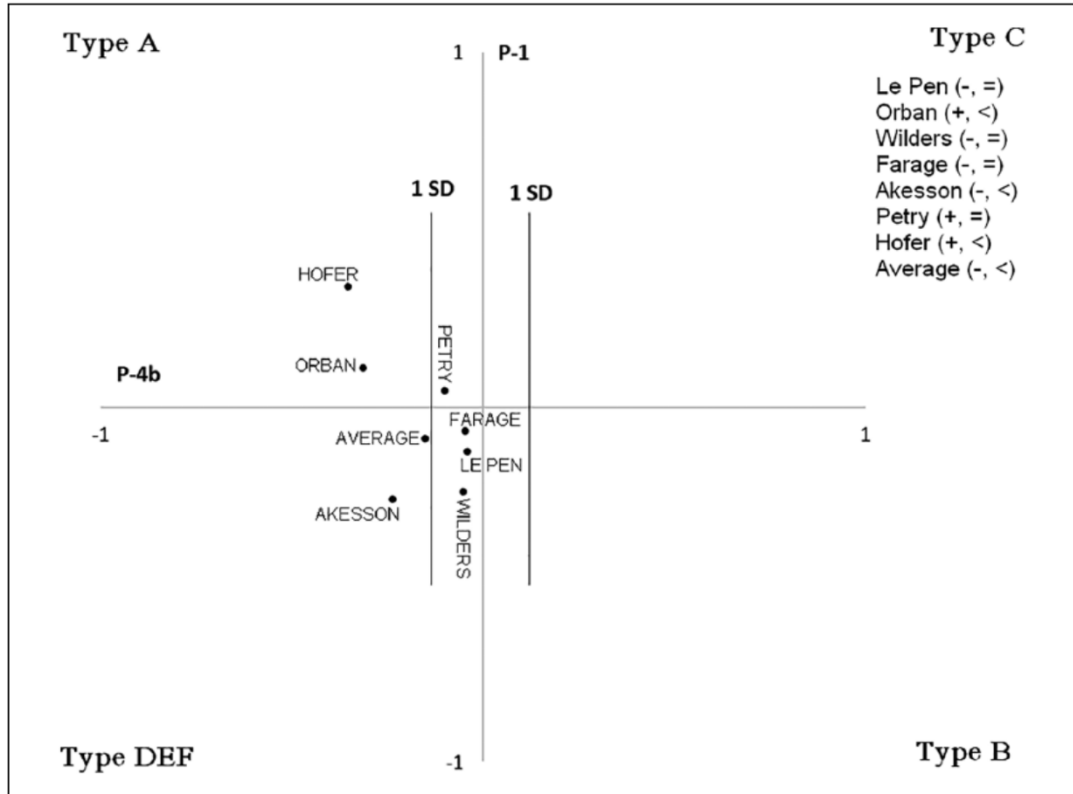


Figure 2. EPRRP leaders' other's location from the norming group mean.

Note. The master belief scores of EPRRP leaders are taken from Özdamar & Ceydilek (2020) (See Appendix 2)

One of the limitations of my data is the restricted number of speeches. I analyzed my material as a single aggregated document and couldn't calculate the mean and standard deviation scores. This restriction prevents me from including Özdağ's scores in the comparative figures. However, to show the position of his self and other scores, I illustrate his profile typology in Figure 3 below.

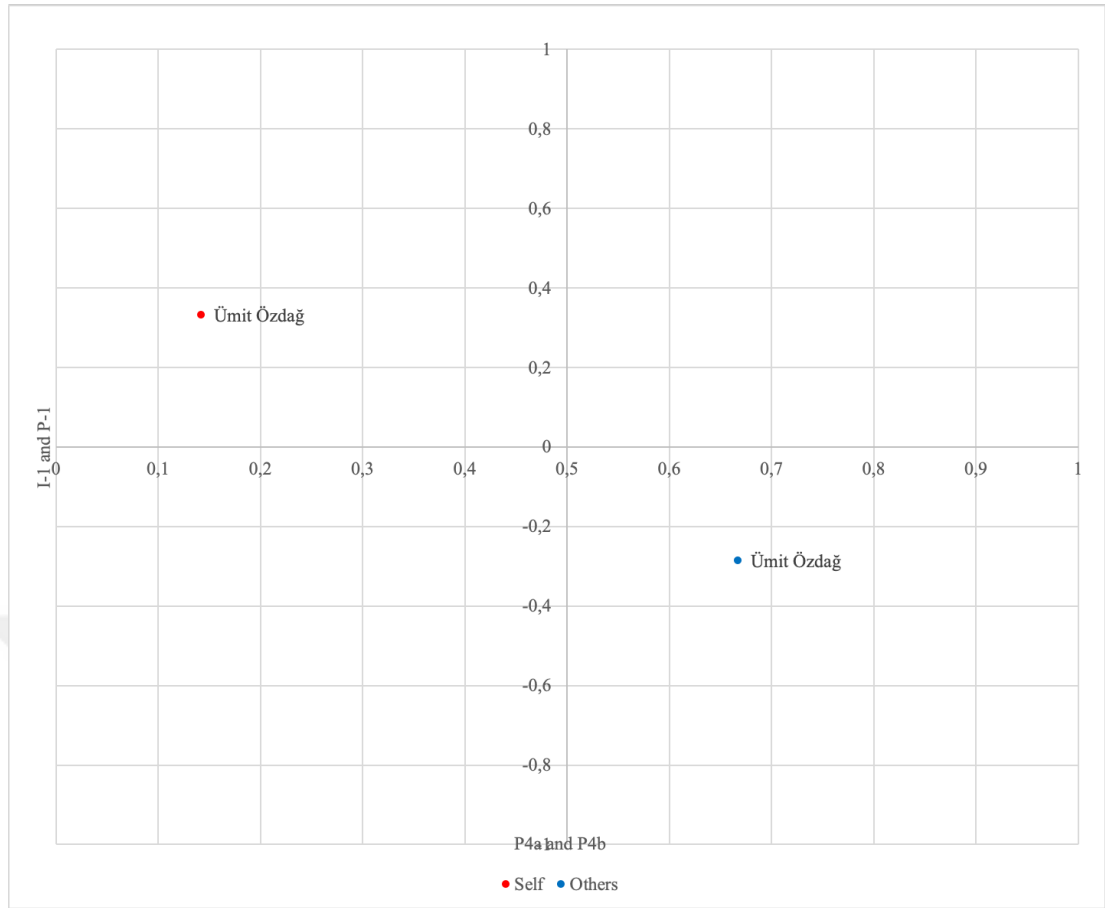


Figure 3. Ümit Özdağ's self and other's location

According to Figure 3, Ümit Özdağ's foreign policy belief system markedly diverges from the average profile of EPRRP leaders, positioning him as one of the most conflict-oriented and rigid figures within this comparative set. His P-1 score of -0,285 reflects a profoundly pessimistic view of the international political environment, indicating that he sees global politics as inherently hostile and adversarial, substantially more so than the EPRRP average, which stands at 0,23, denoting a mildly cooperative outlook. Furthermore, Özdağ's P-4b value of 0,666 reveals a strong attribution of control to external actors, suggesting a belief that significant constraints on Turkey's strategic agency emanate from foreign powers. This externalized perception of historical agency is slightly higher than the EPRRP average of 0,63, reinforcing Özdağ's sense of structural encirclement. Most

distinctively, his I-1 score of 0,14, compared to an EPRRP average of 0,42, exemplifies an inflexible approach to goal selection, signaling limited strategic adaptability and a tendency to pursue ideologically fixed objectives rather than pragmatic adjustments. When juxtaposed with other leaders in the dataset, Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders emerge as the closest counterparts to Özdağ, especially with the I1 value of 0,19, whereas Özdağ's score is 0,14. Hence, Özdağ's belief profile places him on the hardline end of the populist radical right spectrum, closely aligned with Le Pen and Wilders regarding distrust, externalization, and ideological intransigence in foreign policy orientation.

Based on Özdağ's operational code belief scores, his image of "self" corresponds most closely to Type A in Holsti's typology, while his image of "others" aligns with Type B (Holsti, 1977). This interpretation is based on his scores on the three master beliefs. His sharply negative P-1 score (-0, 285) signifies a perception that the political universe is fundamentally conflictual, suggesting that he views the global political arena as hostile and driven by adversarial forces. His I-1 score (0, 14), well below the EPRRP average of 0,42, indicates a strategic preference for unilateral or coercive action over cooperative engagement. Although his P-4a score (0, 333) is not as low as his I-1, it remains below the EPRRP average of 0,37, suggesting only a moderate belief in self's control over historical outcomes. This combination, perceiving politics as adversarial, preferring conflictual strategies, and seeing oneself as having some but not overwhelming agency, corresponds to Holsti's Type A.

In contrast, Özdağ's image of others falls under Type B. As his low P-1 score supports, which confirms a hostile view of the external world, alongside a relatively

high P-4b score (0,666), suggesting that he attributes considerable influence and historical agency to external actors. Type B leaders interpret conflict as stemming from the behavior of opportunistic Others, rather than from immutable systemic conditions. Thus, while distrust remains central, it is directed at the choices and conduct of external actors rather than presumed structural hostility.

Ümit Özdağ, as a populist radical right-wing leader, demonstrates a distinctive view of the political universe, as reflected in his P1 score, which captures his image of ‘others’ in international politics. This differentiation raises a critical question: What underlying factors shape such a worldview? This can be because of the Turkish foreign politics’ historical and strategic context. While he is coming from a nationalist party and family tradition, according to Gül (2022), Alparslan Türkeş’s (-0,69) and Devlet Bahçeli’s (-0,52) P1 scores are even more hostile than Özdağ. So, I argue that the foreign policy of Turkish nationalists is less likely to be cooperative. In an environment where regional security is shaped by direct threats, including the civil war in Syria, irregular migration crisis, and terrorism (e.g, PKK), it is understandable to have a hostile foreign policy view. In Europe, the countries surrounded by stable EU/NATO structures speak from the side of consolidated democracies, unlike Turkey. Another factor might be that, while EPRRP leaders often see ‘others, or enemies’ as culturally incompatible migrants, Özdağ frames the ‘other or enemy’ as external powers like the West and irregular migrants whom he constantly scapegoats as invaders.

6.4. Conclusion

This section has illustrated that while Ümit Özdağ shares several foundational beliefs with European populist radical right-wing leaders, such as skepticism toward international institutions, a strong emphasis on national sovereignty, and a unilateral approach to foreign policy, his belief system also displays notable divergences. His outlook is shaped by a more rigid and confrontational perspective, which appears to be influenced not only by his personal leadership characteristics but also by the broader traditions of Turkish nationalism and the country's challenging geopolitical environment. Operating in a region characterized by instability, persistent security concerns, and a long-standing wariness of Western influence, Özdağ adopts a foreign policy orientation that is more heavily securitized and adversarial than that of his European counterparts. Therefore, while he clearly fits within the populist radical right-wing category, his distinct context gives rise to a foreign policy vision uniquely shaped by Turkish strategic realities (Özdamar, Canbolat, and Young, forthcoming).

CHAPTER 7:

CONCLUSION

7.1. Motivations and contributions of the research

This thesis emerged from the need to address an important but understudied issue: the foreign policy perspectives of populist radical right-wing parties (PRRPs) in Turkey, particularly compared to their European counterparts. While European PRRPs have been the subject of extensive academic discussion, similar movements in Turkey remain relatively unexplored, especially from a foreign policy and leadership belief standpoint. To address this gap, in this study, I focused on the Zafer Partisi and its leader, Ümit Özdağ, using operational code analysis (OCA) to investigate how his worldview shapes his foreign policy preferences. In doing so, the study not only demonstrates the utility of OCA beyond the typical Euro-American domain but also adds to the small but growing body of cognitive foreign policy analysis in populist settings. The research utilizes Turkish-language primary materials and employs automated content analysis via the ProfilerPlus software, thereby offering a replicable model for future scholars interested in “at-a-distance” profiling of political leaders (Schafer & Walker, 2006).

Three main aims drove the research. First, it aimed to highlight the Zafer Partisi as Turkey’s first genuine PRRP, offering insights into how its foreign policy positions

differ from or align with mainstream nationalist parties. Second, the study introduced a methodological contribution by applying OCA, traditionally used for high-profile state actors, to a lesser-known populist leader in Turkey, using Turkish-language content and automated coding tools such as ProfilerPlus. Third, by comparing Özdağ's belief system with European PRRP leaders, the thesis placed the Turkish case within a broader international framework, allowing for meaningful cross-regional comparisons. I tried to contribute to comparative research on populist foreign policy by situating Özdağ within a cross-national framework of EPRRP leaders. Drawing on the dataset developed by Özdamar and Ceydilek (2019), the study reveals both alignments and divergences between Özdağ and his European counterparts.

The findings of this research contribute to the literature in several ways. It offers a clearer understanding of how populist radical right-wing ideologies influence foreign policy in a Turkish context. It also demonstrates the usefulness of OCA as a methodological tool for analyzing non-mainstream leaders and provides a foundation for future research on the intersection of leadership psychology and foreign policy. Moreover, it offers a comparative dimension by showing how Özdağ's beliefs relate to European PRRP leaders, filling a significant empirical gap in the literature.

7.2. Review of the Results

The study's analysis was based on 10,660 words of foreign policy-related discourse by Ümit Özdağ, coded using operational code analysis. I collected the material from various publicly accessible sources, such as long-form interviews and public speeches in which he mentioned foreign policy issues. Verbs in Context System (VICS) via ProfilerPlus enabled the automated extraction of philosophical and

instrumental beliefs embedded in Özdağ's discourse. The results revealed a belief system characterized by a highly pessimistic view of international politics (P-1), a moderate level of confidence in political control (P-4), and a cautious but goal-oriented strategy for achieving objectives (I-1). These findings suggest that Özdağ sees the international system as inherently hostile, believes he can shape outcomes to some degree, and approaches foreign policy in a calculated, practical way.

The study found similarities and differences in comparing his beliefs with those of European PRRP leaders. Özdağ's P-1 score was notably more negative, reflecting a more profound distrust toward external actors. This difference can be interpreted as Turkey's unique strategic position and long-standing grievances in its foreign relations, particularly with the EU, the West, and regional neighbors. His I-1 score was lower than the EPRRP average, implying a more restrained and tactical approach to policy, likely influenced by his outsider status in Turkish politics. Whereas many EPRRP leaders -such as Marine Le Pen or Geert Wilders, operate with long-standing party structures and have episodic access to governance, Özdağ remains largely peripheral in parliamentary politics, emphasizing self-reliance and threat inflation.

Among the leaders analyzed, Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders showed the most significant similarity to Özdağ regarding their nationalistic and anti-globalist worldviews. All these leaders emphasized sovereignty and cultural identity while opposing integrationist policies, framing the political universe as a place of constant threat. However, a divergence can be made as Özdağ's discourse reveals a narrower, security-centered realism with deep civilization undertones, while Le Pen's political leadership style occasionally leans toward pragmatic alliances. This can imply that

although Özdağ shares ideological similarities with the PRRP tradition, his focus on homeland defense and national survival is more existential.

Notably, the analysis confirmed all three hypotheses set out in the study. It showed that Özdağ views international politics as conflictual, has a moderate belief in his ability to influence global outcomes, and exhibits instrumental flexibility in goal setting. These findings not only validate the study's theoretical framework but also demonstrate the effectiveness of operational code analysis in capturing how populist leaders think and act in the realm of foreign policy.

Overall, the results indicate that while Özdağ's beliefs place him firmly within the populist radical right tradition, his strategic decisions also reflect the particular conditions of Turkish politics, suggesting both ideological alignment and contextual distinctiveness. This combination illustrates that PRRP foreign policy worldviews are transnationally comparable and nationally contingent. In Özdağ's case, the influence of Kemalist state tradition, regional instability, and Turkey's complex identity as a NATO member yet EU outsider converge to produce a distinctive belief system that blends radical right populism with realist-nationalist doctrine.

7.3. Limitations and Future Suggestions

This study has several limitations that are important to acknowledge. First, the original research plan included conducting a direct interview with Ümit Özdağ to understand his personal views on foreign policy. However, due to his intense political schedule, I could not reach him, even though I did establish contact with other members of the Victory Party. The situation became even more difficult after his arrest on January 21, 2025, which completely closed the possibility of

communication. Because of these challenges, I relied on an “at-a-distance” research method, operational code analysis, which allowed me to examine his foreign policy beliefs based on publicly available speeches and interviews.

Second, since Ümit Özdağ is a relatively marginal political figure in Turkish politics and is not represented in the mainstream media to the same extent as other opposition leaders, most of his foreign policy statements had to be collected from YouTube interviews and online media. In many cases, foreign policy was only briefly mentioned, sometimes just a few hundred words in a three-hour program. This posed a challenge for the analysis, as the ProfilerPlus software used in this study requires a minimum of 1,000 words and at least 20 transitive verbs to produce valid results. To address this, I combined all collected foreign policy statements into a single document containing approximately 10,660 words. While this approach allowed me to move forward with the analysis, it meant treating a collection of scattered speech excerpts as a single, unified text, which may have affected the consistency or natural flow of the material.

Third, although I used the same methodological framework established by Özdamar and Ceydilek (2020), who calculated the standard deviation and average belief scores of European PRRP leaders and conducted t-tests to check for statistical significance, I was not able to include Ümit Özdağ’s data in the same way (See Appendix 3, due to “undefined” results I couldn’t calculate the SD values when I separately coded the speeches). Because I uploaded all of his speech content as one document, I could not calculate standard deviation and mean scores for his beliefs. As a result, I could not conduct a t-test to determine whether his scores were statistically different from

those of the EPRRP leaders. This situation limited me from quantitatively determining the exact level of similarity or difference between them.

Future research could build on this study in several directions. Scholars might further explore Ümit Özdağ's role in Turkish politics by clearly defining what populist radical right-wing (PRRP) ideology means in the Turkish context. Other studies could also compare multiple nationalist leaders in Turkey to examine how their beliefs and strategies differ across parties, especially among splinter parties like the MHP, İYİP, and the ZP. While operational code analysis offered me valuable insights into Özdağ's belief system, future researchers could also consider using another method, such as content or discourse analysis, which may help understand rhetorical strategies, emotional narratives, and broader ideological patterns. These approaches could complement belief-based methods and contribute to a more complete understanding of how nationalist and populist ideas shape foreign policy in Turkey.

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APPENDIX 1

22 Nisan 2022

Ümit Özdağ Ruşen Çakır ve izleyicilerin sorularını yanıtladı.

<https://www.youtube.com/live/b3Zfq3Q5KXk?si=T27eJ7QLL5vIfrbJ>

4 Ağustos 2022

Mevzular Açık Mikrofon 1. Bölüm I Zafer Partisi Genel Başkanı Prof. Dr. Ümit Özdağ. <https://youtu.be/aXpC6Q-XiUk?si=jg8DhLZi8VaxrpZe>

27 Kasım 2022

Ümit Özdağ: Beni Siz Yarattınız | Belgesel.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MB0XXYRCXJg>

17 Ocak 2023

40 Soru | Ümit Özdağ- Türk Milletinin Devleti Yok Tarikatların Ve Cemaatlerin Devleti Var. https://youtu.be/7pnwkz2vT2c?si=c6fqkZGpR9_EdWH9

5 Haziran 2023

Hakan Fidan'ın Suriye Politikası Nasıl Olacak? Ümit Özdağ'dan Çarpıcı Yorum.

https://youtu.be/u_lw9aapgmg?si=MsQ0-egEohevzSzD

28 Temmuz 2023

Zafer Partisi Genel Başkanı Prof. Dr. Ümit Özdağ, Fatih Altaylı'nın sorularını yanıtladı. https://youtu.be/QMzUcCFWzz4?si=Keur-16E_RFYmzok

20 Mart 2024

“Suriyeliler'e düşman değilim” Zafer Partisi Genel Başkanı Prof. Dr. Ümit Özdağ & Fatih Altaylı. <https://youtu.be/gfnqgWJwGtI?si=bd0NCEhgMtcBPn2u>

20 Kasım 2024

“Bu sürecin sonu bölünmedir!” / Zafer Partisi Genel Başkanı Ümit Özdağ & Fatih Altaylı. <https://youtu.be/2hd07kQAmNk?si=JEymJpDOe7WzlzUs>

APPENDIX 2

Özdamar & Ceydilek (2020), EPRRP leaders' scores

	Norming Group		Marine Le Pen		Viktor Orban		Geert Wilders		Nigel Farage		Frauke Petry		Norbert Hofer		Average	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Philosophical Beliefs																
P-1	0,301	0,286	0,068	0,336	0,413	0,183	0,063	0,196	0,178	0,284	0,348	0,145	0,643	0,190	0,235	0,455
		164		10		26		20		21		7		5		95
P-2	0,147	0,215	-0,001	0,210	0,183	0,139	-0,051	0,138	0,027	0,184	0,154	0,134	0,362	0,131	0,073	0,162
		164		10		26		20		21		7		5		95
P-3	0,134	0,072	0,323	0,293	0,443	0,163	0,283	0,135	0,292	0,127	0,421	0,208	0,776	0,486	0,375	0,229
		164		10		26		20		21		7		5		95
P-4	0,224	0,127	0,273	0,116	0,538	0,201	0,277	0,176	0,266	0,200	0,326	0,141	0,578	0,325	0,377	0,230
		164		10		26		20		21		7		5		95
P-5	0,968	0,037	0,910	0,112	0,755	0,139	0,923	0,080	0,919	0,080	0,847	0,148	0,620	0,236	0,847	0,147
		164		10		26		20		21		7		5		95
Instrumental Beliefs																
I-1	0,401	0,430	0,193	0,262	0,518	0,297	0,270	0,375	0,481	0,534	0,274	0,261	0,810	0,220	0,420	0,394
		164		10		26		20		21		7		5		95
I-2	0,178	0,280	0,060	0,231	0,234	0,219	0,125	0,217	0,211	0,346	0,078	0,109	0,389	0,105	0,191	0,261
		164		10		26		20		21		7		5		95
I-3	0,332	0,244	0,241	0,126	0,311	0,174	0,357	0,263	0,564	0,322	0,210	0,105	0,446	0,136	0,382	0,253
		164		10		26		20		21		7		5		95
I-4	0,503	0,314	0,732	0,169	0,478	0,291	0,635	0,278	0,417	0,414	0,700	0,226	0,190	0,220	0,527	0,327
		164		10		26		20		21		7		5		95
I-4a	0,464	0,311	0,583	0,292	0,542	0,242	0,317	0,124	0,353	0,343	0,457	0,189	0,320	0,215	0,422	0,292
		164		10		26		20		21		7		5		95
I-5	0,157	0,179	0,145	0,140	0,187	0,152	0,166	0,222	0,160	0,266	0,087	0,123	0,150	0,111	0,169	0,210
		164		10		26		20		21		7		5		95
I-5a	0,075	0,117	0,045	0,078	0,038	0,056	0,037	0,113	0,018	0,056	0,093	0,183	0,080	0,143	0,038	0,090
		164		10		26		20		21		7		5		95
I-5c	0,468	0,229	0,409	0,195	0,535	0,171	0,432	0,286	0,562	0,348	0,457	0,222	0,676	0,116	0,503	0,256
		164		10		26		20		21		7		5		95
I-5d	0,154	0,183	0,220	0,137	0,124	0,105	0,211	0,161	0,160	0,220	0,203	0,166	0,084	0,104	0,170	0,160
		164		10		26		20		21		7		5		95
I-5e	0,034	0,064	0,021	0,035	0,010	0,025	0,046	0,117	0,012	0,055	0,013	0,034	0,000	0,000	0,020	0,064
		164		10		26		20		21		7		5		95
I-5f	0,112	0,146	0,163	0,175	0,109	0,111	0,109	0,124	0,087	0,147	0,149	0,103	0,012	0,027	0,102	0,127
		164		10		26		20		21		7		5		95

APPENDIX 3

Operational code results when I uploaded the speeches separately.

FILENAME	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	MMARYIN	I1	I2	I3	I4a	I4b	I5-Reward	I5-Promise	I5-Support	I5-Oppose	I5-Threaten	I5-Punish
Speech1.txt	undefined	undefined	undefined	1	undefined	undefined	-1	-1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Speech2.txt	1	0.3333	1	0.6667	0.3333	0	1	0.3333	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Speech3.txt	-0.3333	-0.111099996	0.46670002	0	1.0	undefined	undefined	undefined	undefined	undefined	0	undefined	undefined	undefined	undefined	undefined	undefined
Speech4.txt	undefined	undefined	undefined	1	undefined	undefined	-1	-1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Speech5.txt	-1	-1	1	0.5	0.5	1	1	0.3333	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0
Speech6.txt	-0.3333	-0.5556	0.46670002	0	1.0	undefined	undefined	undefined	undefined	undefined	0.6667	undefined	undefined	undefined	undefined	undefined	undefined
Speech7.txt	-0.3333	-0.5556	0.46670002	0	1.0	undefined	undefined	undefined	undefined	undefined	0.6667	undefined	undefined	undefined	undefined	undefined	undefined
Speech8.txt	-0.3333	-0.5556	0.46670002	0.25	0.883325	0.6666	1	0.3333	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0