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THE VICTORY PARTY

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THE VICTORY PARTY:
THE FIRST CASE OF THE RADICAL RIGHT
IN TURKISH POLITICS

A Master's Thesis

by
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To my dear family



THE VICTORY PARTY: THE FIRST CASE OF THE RADICAL RIGHT IN
TURKISH POLITICS

The Graduate School of Economics and Social Sciences

of

İhsan Doğramacı Bilkent University

by

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By Selin Ertızman

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

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ABSTRACT

THE VICTORY PARTY: THE FIRST CASE OF THE RADICAL RIGHT IN TURKISH POLITICS

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This dissertation examines the Victory Party (Zafer Partisi, ZP) as the first identifiable case of radical right politics in Turkey, with a focus on its anti-immigrant rhetoric and broader political agenda. Drawing on party documents, social media discourse, and semi-structured interviews with party members, the dissertation applies a theoretical framework grounded in the literature on radical right parties – emphasizing ideological pillars such as ethnic nationalism, exclusionary and inclusionary populism, nativism, xenophobia, racism, and authoritarianism. While these host ideologies have primarily been explored in Western European contexts, this research contributes a non-Western case, highlighting both continuities and departures in how radical right strategies are articulated within the Turkish political landscape. The findings reveal that although ZP mirrors many ideological and strategic patterns seen in European radical right parties, it also displays localized adaptations shaped by Turkey's unique sociopolitical environment. Its construction of migration as an existential threat legitimizes exclusionary measures and intensifies securitized, nationalist discourse. Simultaneously, the party positions itself as a legalistic and populist force against a corrupt elite, capitalizing on democratic disillusionment. The study concludes that ZP's rise reflects broader trends in global radical right mobilization while offering a distinct configuration of Turkish nationalism. By analyzing a case outside the traditional European focus, this dissertation facilitates the

comparative study of the radical right and contributes to understanding the interplay between nationalism and immigration politics in contemporary Turkey.

Keywords: Anti-Immigrant Sentiments, Nationalism, Radical Right Parties, Victory Party



ÖZET

ZAFER PARTİSİ: TÜRK SİYASETİNDE RADİKAL SAĞ'IN İLK ÖRNEĞİ

Ertızman, Selin

Yüksek Lisans, Siyaset Bilimi

Tez Danışmanı: Doç. Dr. İhsan İlker Aytürk

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Bu tez, Zafer Partisi'ni (ZP) Türkiye'deki radikal sağ siyasetin ilk örneği olarak incelemekte ve özellikle partinin göçmen karşıtı söylemi ile daha geniş siyasal gündemine odaklanmaktadır. Parti belgeleri, sosyal medya paylaşımları ve parti üyeleriyle yapılan yarı yapılandırılmış mülakatlara dayanan bu çalışma, etnik milliyetçilik, popülizm, yerlililik, yabancı düşmanlığı, ırkçılık ve otoriterlik gibi ideolojik temellere dayanan radikal sağ kuramsal çerçeveyi esas almaktadır. Bu ideolojik yapı taşları bugüne dek büyük ölçüde Batı Avrupa bağlamında ele alınmış olsa da bu tez Batı dışı bir örnek sunarak radikal sağ partilerin stratejilerinin Türkiye bağlamında nasıl kurulduğunu ortaya koymakta ve literatüre bir katkı sunmaktadır. Bulgular, ZP'nin Avrupa'daki radikal sağ partilerle birçok ideolojik ve stratejik benzerlik taşıdığını ancak Türkiye'ye özgü toplumsal ve siyasal dinamiklere göre şekillenen yerel uyarlamalara da sahip olduğunu göstermektedir. Parti, göçü varoluşsal bir tehdit olarak konumlandırarak dışlayıcı tedbirleri meşrulaştırmakta ve güvenlik merkezli, milliyetçi bir söylemi derinleştirmektedir. Aynı zamanda ZP, yozlaşmış seçkinlere karşı hukuki temelli ve popülist bir güç olarak kendini konumlandırarak demokratik hayal kırıklığını siyasal kazanca dönüştürmektedir. Tezin ulaştığı sonuç, ZP'nin yükselişinin küresel radikal sağ hareketlerin Türkiye'deki bir yansıması olduğu, ancak bu örneğin aynı zamanda Türk milliyetçiliğinin kendine özgü yeni bir yapılanmasını temsil ettiğidir. Bu çalışma, geleneksel Avrupa merkezli literatürün ötesine geçerek radikal sağın karşılaştırmalı analizi için Türkiye'de milliyetçilik-göç ilişkisini incelemek adına yeni bir çerçeve sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Göçmen Karşıtlığı, Milliyetçilik, Radikal Sağ Partiler, Zafer Partisi



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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Right-wing politics has gained increasing visibility and influence across the globe, marked by a significant rise in both the far right and the radical right in the last decades. It has historically been the dominant force in Turkish political life as well, deeply shaping the country's political institutions, social structures, and ideological currents. Since the transition to multi-party democracy in the 1950s, right-wing movements – ranging from conservative and nationalist to religiously oriented parties – have consistently secured mass electoral support. Even during periods when left-wing movements managed to gain political ground, such as the 1960s or the early 2000s with the rise of social democratic or reformist forces, the right has often reemerged with greater strength and influence, reshaping the political agenda around nationalism, security, religion, and tradition. Each resurgence has typically been fueled by a reaction against perceived threats posed by leftist reforms, secularization, or liberalization, reinforcing the durability and adaptability of the Turkish right.

While nationalism has long been a prominent force in Turkish political life as part of the right-wing since the multi-party period, recent years have witnessed the emergence of trends similar to those observed in Europe and elsewhere. Particularly, the intensification of anti-immigrant politics has played a central role in sharpening one such trend, radical right movements, helping them secure broader political traction. Broadly anti-immigrant politics is employed by the parties that focus on the immigration issue as their core political concern in political campaigns or at least, that are considered by the leadership of other parties to do so (Fennema, 1997). Such parties use immigrants as scapegoats in explaining their countries' problems, be it social, economic or political (Fennema, 1997). Without any question, one notable example of this in the Turkish context is the rise of the Victory Party (*Zafer Partisi*,

ZP). Originating from factions within the Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP) and later the Good Party (*İYİ Parti*, İYİP), the ZP has distinguished itself as a political actor whose identity is strongly built around an openly anti-immigrant discourse. Drawing substantial public attention and political relevance primarily through its hardline stance on immigration, the ZP represents a new development within the Turkish right.

In the light of these, this dissertation aims to elaborate on the ZP from the perspective of migration and political party studies. It will try to contribute to the literature by working on the nexus of radical right parties and anti-immigrant sentiments, making it a case of the first party in Turkey politicizing migration and having an openly anti-immigrant rhetoric. It will explore the extent to which the ZP can be classified as a radical right party, potentially marking the first such case in Turkish politics, by specifically analyzing its rhetoric and policies on immigration. Through offering background analysis of the party and its officials, this study also seeks to serve as a comprehensive introductory work on the ZP addressing not only its stance on immigration but its broader political agenda as well. In this way, I believe this thesis will fill the gap created by the lack of academic works on the ZP and more generally, radical right in Turkey. In order to address these objectives, this study poses the central research question: “How does the Victory Party politicize immigration, and what does this reveal about the emergence of radical right politics in Turkey?” The analysis of this question will facilitate a comprehensive examination of the ZP, including the motivations behind its establishment, the significance of its founders’ prior political affiliations, its ideological orientation and approach to immigration, its positioning within the radical right party family, and its implications for Turkish politics in terms of issue salience, policy convergence, and electoral potential.

Existing studies on the Victory Party have primarily concentrated on its populist discourse, nationalist ideology, and anti-immigration stance – especially in the context of the 2023 elections. Much of this research situates ZP within the broader rise of far-right populism both globally and in Turkey, often comparing it to its European counterparts such as AfD, RN, and Reconquête (Akça, 2025; Akçay & Deniz, 2022; Koca & Saç, 2024; Mazlum, 2024; Uzun, 2024). These works typically apply content or discourse analysis to ZP’s manifesto, speeches by its leader Ümit Özdağ, and social

media content, revealing the party's use of exclusionary rhetoric, crisis-framing, and scapegoating narratives, particularly in relation to refugees (Akça, 2025; Ceylan et al., 2025; Koca & Saç, 2024; Mazlum, 2024; Türk, 2024). In particular, one study frames ZP as the first example of a European-style radical right party in Turkey (Akçay & Deniş, 2022), while others analyze its ideological roots in Turkish nationalism and its overlaps with European far-right actors (Koca & Saç, 2024; Mazlum, 2024; Uzun, 2024). Additionally, ZP's role in politicizing migration and securitizing public discourse during the 2023 elections is examined in relation to the global rise of right-wing populism (Akça, 2025; Mazlum, 2024) as well as how it affected the voter behavior (Gerim, 2025).

While these studies offer valuable insights into ZP's discourse and positioning, they remain limited in scope – often focusing on narrow datasets such as social media content (Özdemir, 2023) or specific issues like immigration (Türk, 2024; Koca & Saç, 2024; Mazlum, 2024), without providing a comprehensive assessment of the party's full political program, broader policy proposals, or internal development. Moreover, few studies explore ZP's organizational structure, long-term political strategy, or multi-sectoral agenda beyond migration and identity politics. My study aims to fill this gap by offering a systematic and holistic analysis of the ZP using a wider range of primary sources – including official party documents, thematic policy proposals, and elite interviews. Most importantly, the majority of the existing literature – with the exception of Akçay and Deniş (2022) – situate the ZP within the far-right framework. I will take issue with this and offer the radical right as a more apt term, which has far greater explanatory power in understanding the evolution of the ZP. In doing so, this dissertation not only advances our understanding of ZP's ideological framework and political ambitions but also contributes to the broader literature on the rise of the radical right in non-European, non-Western contexts like Turkey.

1.1. What is Radical Right?

In studying the ZP through the lens of radical right theory, it is crucial to establish clear terminological distinctions. While the terms “far right” and “radical right” are often used interchangeably, political science literature draws meaningful boundaries between them. Scholars such as Mudde (2016) and Pirro (2022) argue that the far right should be understood as an umbrella term encompassing both the radical right

and the extreme right. The primary distinction lies in their stance toward democracy: radical right actors accept procedural democracy but reject liberal democratic values, whereas extreme right actors openly reject democratic principles and seek to dismantle the constitutional order. The radical right, therefore, occupies an illiberal democratic space. These actors formally uphold democratic procedures like elections, yet undermine liberal tenets such as minority rights, pluralism, and individual freedoms (Smilova, 2021; Merkel & Scholl, 2018). They view liberalism as fostering rootlessness and moral decay, arguing that “Human beings need roots and togetherness, but liberal society pulls them apart and condemns them to an agitated and rootless mobility” (Holmes, 1996, p. 6). Instead, they favor a majoritarian ethnonationalism in which the rights of the dominant group are prioritized over those of minorities. In contrast, extreme right actors aim to abolish democracy altogether, often engaging in overtly anti-democratic or violent practices (Pirro, 2022). This study adopts the term “radical right” to describe political actors such as ZP that challenge the sociocultural order within democratic structures without entirely rejecting democratic procedures. Understanding this distinction allows us to engage more precisely with the ideological framework that defines radical right parties (RRPs).

Radical right parties are best understood through their ideological core, which combines ethnonationalist xenophobia and anti-establishment populism. This ideological core is defined as the *master frame* by Rydgren (2004; 2005; 2018) and is frequently intertwined with nativism and authoritarianism (Mudde, 2007; Rydgren, 2018). RRP express a radical form of nationalism, often structured around myths of a strong, idealized past and a desire to restore national strength through ethnic and cultural homogeneity (Rydgren, 2018). Nationalism, as Gellner (1983) notes, is the principle that the national and political units should coincide and ethnic nationalism, in contrast to civic nationalism, defines the nation through shared ancestry, language, and culture, and serves as the foundation for exclusionary policies. Nationalism allows political actors to turn culture into politics and power based on their assumptions about ‘the nation’ (Elgenius & Rydgren, 2022). For ethnic nationalists, a nation can fulfill its destiny and gain strength if it becomes the true representative of only the dominant ethnic group (Rydgren, 2018). It is no surprise that there is a dominant ethnic group that unequally demands to be favored. In the end, such

extremist parties are placed on the 'right' with regards to their views on equality and to them, inequalities are natural or at least acceptable without active political intervention (Bobbio, 1996). Therefore, reducing inequalities based on ethnicity, and sometimes even gender, is met with hostility, as a quite visible characteristic of an RRP. Thus, this form of nationalism is integral to the radical right's anti-immigrant position, as it justifies the marginalization of those who fall outside the dominant ethnic group (Hjerm, 1998; Kunovich, 2009).

Adding up to these, the concept of ethnopluralism, drawn from the French *nouvelle droite*, reinforces this by arguing that different ethnic groups should live separately to preserve cultural uniqueness (Taguieff, 1988; Minkenberg, 2000). Although hierarchy, visible differences or incompatibility between nations are not emphasized as in racism, the *nouvelle droite* or ethnopluralism draws upon Gramsci's notion of 'cultural hegemony'. Authoritarianism within RRP's emphasizes law and order, traditional values, and social cohesion at the expense of individual freedoms and pluralism. This illiberal worldview holds that the will of the majority, defined in ethnonationalist terms, should override minority rights. In this context, liberal democracy is perceived as a threat because it enables diversity and dissent, which the radical right views as undermining national unity (Smilova, 2021; Merkel & Scholl, 2018).

Xenophobia is another ideological element that reinforces the exclusionary logic of the radical right. It constructs an image of the "other" based on fear or hostility toward foreigners, often grounded in a perception of threat (Rzepnikowska, 2019).

Xenophobic attitudes are frequently articulated through economic nativism and welfare chauvinism, both of which advocate limiting socioeconomic benefits to native citizens while excluding immigrants (Betz, 2019). In contrast to nationalism's focus on the nation and populism's emphasis on the people, xenophobia centers on the outgroup or foreigner as a source of anxiety and disruption (Newth, 2023). Closely related to xenophobia, nativism is described as a xenophobic and racist political logic that discursively constructs a dichotomy between the native and the non-native, often extending even to poorly integrated co-citizens (Newth, 2023). It broadly refers to the belief that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group, and that non-native elements, such as immigrants, threaten the homogeneity and security

of the nation. Nativism shares the "us vs. them" logic with populism and the ethnocultural focus of nationalism, while also drawing on xenophobic fear. It often portrays migration as an invasion and demands cultural assimilation.

Another staple of radical right politics, populism offers a distinct discursive logic by dividing society between a virtuous people and a corrupt elite (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013). In the case of the radical right, this division takes on both a vertical (people vs. elite) and a horizontal (native vs. foreigner) dimension. Populism constructs people drawing on the former framework, while nationalism deals with the latter distinction. Regarding the twofold distinction within populism, exclusionary populism constructs the people as an ethnoculturally homogeneous group, thereby legitimizing the exclusion of immigrants and minorities from the political community (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2007; Morgül, 2022), while inclusionary populism positions "the people" against elites without necessarily defining the outgroup along ethnic or cultural lines. Populism further empowers radical right actors to denounce pluralism and democratic representation from the anti-establishment perspective, by suggesting that elites no longer represent the homogenous people. In line with this, the true representatives of the homogeneous majority become the populist radical right actors themselves.

Populist actors also consistently construct and reinforce fear by framing their discourse around victimhood and blame, portraying the native population as under threat and the elites or outsiders as responsible for crisis (Erçetin & Erdoğan, 2023). This discursive strategy sustains a sense of insecurity and sharpens the binary opposition between "us" and "them," thereby justifying the need for strong leadership to protect national interests and cultural unity. Within this framework, populist leaders present themselves as the only legitimate representatives of the people and the last defenders of the nation's integrity (Erçetin & Erdoğan, 2023). Similarly, new-right movements intentionally produce and circulate narratives of societal crisis – emphasizing decline, collapse, or impending catastrophe – which, despite differing local contexts, follow a structurally similar pattern (Schilk, 2025). These narratives are repeated persistently to shape the public imagination, build cultural dominance, and ultimately normalize the ideological foundations of the far-right.

Lastly, racism constitutes the most extreme form among these ideological elements. While its manifestations vary depending on historical and social contexts (Hall, 1992), racism is broadly defined as an ideology that stigmatizes groups based on perceived physical or cultural differences, implying the impossibility of successful integration and justifying exclusion (Hargreaves & Leaman, 1995). Although explicit racism has become less common among contemporary radical right actors, especially following the Holocaust, anti-immigrant attitudes remain prevalent – now often directed toward Muslim populations in the post-9/11 context. Due to its extreme nature, racism rather defines the extent to which radical right actors exclude “others” or “non-natives” (Hargreaves & Leaman, 1995). In practice, racism and its adjacent ideologies shape exclusionary public policies that negatively affect immigrants’ physical, mental, and material well-being. As these ideologies overlap in political discourse, their boundaries are often blurred, reinforcing each other in the radical right’s broader anti-immigrant framework.

These ideological pillars – (ethno)nationalism, populism, xenophobia, nativism, authoritarianism, and racism – form the analytical lens through which I examine the ZP. RRP not only embody a distinct ideological profile but also constitute one of the most extensively studied party families in political science. According to Mudde (2019), the radical right represents the fourth wave of far-right politics, marked by its increasing normalization and electoral success in the 21st century. In contrast to earlier waves, which were often marginalized, contemporary RRP have managed to shape public discourse, influence immigration policies, and expand their support base. Rydgren (2018) also highlights the broader ecosystem in which RRP operate, pointing to their ties with intellectual circles, civil society organizations, and media platforms that legitimize and disseminate radical right ideas. Drawing on this framework, the following chapters will, first, make the case that the ZP is Turkey’s first radical right party and second, explore how the ZP constructs its political identity by drawing on radical right ideologies. Through an analysis of elite interviews and party documents, I assess how ZP frames immigration, defines national belonging, and positions itself vis-à-vis the political establishment in Turkey.

Since its establishment in 2021, the ZP has remained electorally marginal, though it has managed to attract significant public attention with its anti-immigrant rhetoric.

According to Rydgren and Van der Meiden (2019), when a political party takes ownership of anti-immigrant politics – namely, politicizes immigration — it often influences voting behavior in a more radicalized direction. This likely results from their populist discourse which has a mobilizing effect on voters (Aytaç, Çarkoğlu & Elçi, 2024). In the 2023 general elections, the ZP secured approximately 2.2% of the national vote, falling short of the electoral threshold and thus failing to gain parliamentary representation (Sözcü, 2023). Its performance in the 2024 local elections was similarly modest, with 2.4% of the vote (Sözcü, 2024). This relative underperformance may relate to what Elçi (2022) suggests: right-wing populist parties sometimes struggle to garner support depending on the type of nostalgia that underpins their populist mobilization. In the Turkish context, nostalgia has been a recurring populist theme, typically expressed through invocations of a “Golden Age.” However, Elçi (2022) identifies two competing forms of this nostalgia: one rooted in secularist memory of the early Republican era, characterized by independence, self-sufficiency, and modernist aspirations (Kemalist nostalgia); and the other grounded in Islamist longing for the Ottoman past (Ottoman nostalgia). While the ZP draws primarily on the former, research suggests that Ottoman nostalgia has a significantly stronger mobilizing effect (Elçi 2022), although they are content with their lives (Aytaç, Çarkoğlu & Elçi, 2020). Consequently, in a polarized society where many voters yearn for an imperial-like order, the ZP’s pro-Republican, Kemalist rhetoric has limited resonance at the ballot box.

As opposed to its party’s performance, the party leader Ümit Özdağ gained visibility through the presidential race in 2023, endorsing opposition candidate Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu in the second round, which gave the party a bargaining position disproportionate to its vote share. Regarding its voter base, ZP primarily attracts young, nationalist, and secular-leaning voters, many of whom are frustrated with both the government and the traditional opposition, and who also view immigrants as Turkey’s most pressing issue. A considerable portion of the party’s supporters consists of young male citizens, a trend I also observed during the second ordinary congress. During the event, they loudly cheered for Özdağ, referring to him as “Bozkurt” (Gray Wolf) – a significant symbol in Turkish mythology –, a title that symbolically positions him as their ultimate leader and guide. The prominence of young voters is also acknowledged within the party, as noted by Interviewee 6 (25 November 2024),

who emphasized that this demographic compels the party to make more effective use of social media as a primary means of communication. This likely explains the willingness of party officials to participate in the interviews and support my research process.

1.2. Research Design and Methodology

Considering that ZP has shined over its anti-immigrant stance resembling radical right characteristics in the Turkish political scene, I will study the ZP using a qualitative single case study as an example of a broader phenomenon. A case can be conceptualized as “an instance of a class of events” (George & Bennett, 2005, p. 5,17) and thus, a case study is “the detailed examination of an aspect of a historical episode to develop or test historical explanations that may be generalizable to other events” (George and Bennett, 2005, p. 17). As Gerring (2007, pp. 13, 19–20) suggests, case studies are intensive investigations of single units, selected with the purpose of contributing to theoretical insights about a broader population of similar cases. Hence, a central question to ask of any case study is “what is this a case of?” (Levy, 2008).

In this dissertation, the ZP is approached not as a historical event per se, but as a well-defined part of a broader political phenomenon – a case within a larger “class of events” such as the radical right parties. In this context, the ZP serves as an instance through which the dynamics of the radical right in non-Western settings can be explored. While the study is grounded in a comparative agenda, it also follows an idiographic logic. According to Levy (2008), idiographic case studies aim to understand, interpret, and explain a single case as an end in itself, rather than merely serving broader generalizations. However, this study aligns more specifically with what Levy (2008) defines as theory-guided case studies as a sub-category of idiographic studies, in which social scientists deliberately and systematically apply theoretical frameworks to explain discrete cases. Such an approach not only enhances conceptual clarity by making normative assumptions and causal claims explicit but also increases the analytical precision and empirical evaluability of the findings (Levy, 2008). In line with this, the theoretical literature on the European radical right informs the analysis of the ZP’s ideological and discursive patterns, enabling a more structured interpretation of the ZP within the Turkish context.

Although the radical anti-immigrant stance has formed the well-known image of the party and aroused interest, it was not particularly desired by the party officials. The reluctance was twofold; either the party's political agenda could be perceived limited to immigration policies or it could seem racist and xenophobic for it centers its rhetoric around immigration. Given the increasing popularity and influence of radical right movements in global politics often characterized by a similar discourse, ZP has been visibly associated with radical right parties as well – another association the party itself actively seeks to avoid.

Hence the design of this study serves to explore the past and present of ZP based on interviews, with the aim of gaining deeper insight into how party officials reflect on party's current image, stance and organization. These interviews form the backbone of this study as they demonstrate how party officials, who were also members of the small group originating from MHP and later İYİP, decided to establish, present and situate the party in the Turkish politics. In that way, this dissertation will likely fill another gap and allow readers to see ZP from the party's own eyes. There are also official party documents such as the party manifesto, program, and additional party policies addressing topics like the economy, natural disasters, agriculture, and drug use prevention provided by the officials themselves. Regarding the secondary sources, scholarly works as well as the news and reports on the party were utilized for drawing a frame for the radical right to see how ZP fits into the picture in terms of situating the party within the broader political spectrum.

In addressing these, I examined the time period starting from the day ZP was established on August 26, 2021, and ending with the day second ordinary congress is held on December 8, 2024. While the starting date is fixed and undisputed, the end date has been deliberately selected, as the party executive board underwent changes during this congress, and not all interviewees have remained in office or in the same position after December 8, 2024.

The introductory nature of this work has led me to utilize all kinds of sources I could possibly reach, as overviewed above, and combine different approaches regarding political party studies. The very same nature encouraged me not to concentrate on single issues or comparisons, but rather to provide a broader perspective for the

reader. Thus, while the official party documents or social media posts/entries are commonly used as main sources of data so far (Mazlum, 2024; Uğurlu, 2024; Uzun, 2024), I tried to accumulate data using all these in a complementary manner. For the very same reason, I did not focus on Ümit Özdağ's long political career, although he is the prominent figure and the main face of the party as in many radical right parties. Following Karaçalık's (2024) path, I value the agency of the party elite along with the leader as they are an essential part of decision-making processes within party. In fact, as Karaçalık (2024) continues, the party elite in ZP's case are of MHP origin, who chose to leave the party struggling with despotic leadership of Devlet Bahçeli and take part in the establishment of a more democratic project. Therefore, it is of no use to limit my perspective to the leader and overlook other founding members.

For obvious reasons discussed above, elite interviews was the best route I could take in my research for a broader outlook of the party. The interviews were conducted as semi-structured, under the assurance of confidentiality and face-to-face in the party building, in Ankara between April 2024 and November 2024. For one, semi-structured interviews gave room for extended answers to my questions and explore more than I expected. Although confidentiality was assured along the academic ethic rules, the interviewees expressed no concerns with revealing their names and they reciprocated with a sincere assurance of truthfulness. Lastly, during my continuous visits, by nature face-to-face interviews allowed me to observe internal politics, which in the long run supported my analysis.

1.2.1. Selection of the Interviewees

I selected my interviewees from among the party members who are closest to the decision-making processes regarding party policies and internal politics. In the outset of my research, my sample was designed to include the members of *Başkanlık Divanı* (Chairmanship Council, BD). In the end, most of my interviewees also happened to be the founding members (FM), who were in the close circle of Ümit Özdağ since they were members of MHP and İYİP, and the *Genel İdare Kurulu* (General Executive Board, GİK).

Based on the Turkish Political Parties Act No.2820 and party constitution, there are two main bodies within ZP operating as decision-making and executive bodies. First,

the GİK serves as the party's main decision-making authority, overseeing key issues such as the execution of the party program and constitution while managing the party organization, making amendments to the party constitution, organizing party congresses, and making preparations for participating in elections (Zafer Partisi, n.d.a, p. 19). There are currently 75 full members and 25 substitute members within GİK, nominated by at least one-third of the delegates and elected in the party congress. Second, the BD serves as the main executive body which is in charge of implementing the decisions taken by the GİK and in the party congress, while also mediating the relations between party hierarchy and *Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi* (Turkish Grand National Assembly, TBMM). It consists of the party leader, the secretary general, vice chairs, the treasurer, three deputy secretaries general, and two deputy treasurers (Zafer Partisi, n.d.a., p. 20-21).

Reaching party officials for the interviews took nearly a year due to the volatile political environment in Turkey following local and general elections, along with the ZP's turbulent agenda and ongoing efforts to consolidate itself. I initially contacted the private secretary of the party leader and founder, Ümit Özdağ, who referred me to the president of the youth branch. This contact led to the first interview in April 2024. However, all subsequent interview requests were declined until November 2024, primarily due to the party's demanding schedule, including local branch meetings and leadership visits to cities hosting the largest number of refugees¹, as well as cities where refugee-related incidents had occurred. In November 2024, one of the party's vice presidents reached out and helped facilitate as many interviews as possible. Within two weeks, I was able to conduct six additional interviews with members of

¹ From this point onwards, I use the term "refugee" to refer broadly to forcibly displaced individuals from various ethnic backgrounds who are frequently mentioned in the ZP's discourse. The party primarily focuses on Syrians under Temporary Protection (SuTP), as well as Afghans, Iraqis, and Iranians – groups it associates with socio-cultural incompatibility. Although referring to these individuals as "immigrants" is technically incorrect under Turkish legal framework, the term "Syrians" has become a common shorthand among the public and political actors, due to their early arrival and large numbers. As the number of Afghans in Turkey has grown, this label has shifted toward the term *sığınmacılar* – a Turkish word that ambiguously refers to both "refugees" and "asylum-seekers," given the lack of direct equivalents in Turkish. The ZP tends to use terminology that aligns with legal distinctions, referring to groups as Syrians under Temporary Protection, Afghans, fugitives (*kaçaklar*), irregular migrants, or refugees, depending on their status. In what follows, I will use "refugee" as an umbrella term to encompass all of these groups, while acknowledging the imprecision of this usage. The legal and terminological distinctions will be further clarified in Chapter 3.

the BD. In the following period, the party was heavily occupied with preparations for its Second Ordinary Congress, held on December 8, 2024, which further complicated efforts to schedule an interview with the party leader. A month later, on January 21, 2025, Ümit Özdağ was arrested, making it impossible to conduct the final planned interview.

Starting from February 2024, I tried to reach as many members of BD as possible, and based on their schedule I was called on for the interviews. As discussed above, as members of a newly established party trying to qualify for an election campaign and consolidate its cadres, the BD was hardly available which limited my sampling strategies to convenience sampling. At the time, it was practically less demanding in terms of resources and did not require leveraging existing networks, formal requests, and gatekeepers as I have none (Richards, 1996; Goldstein, 2002). My goal was depth and insight, not statistical representativeness, although this method limited the external validity and generalizability of the findings. Within approximately 10 months, I was able to interview seven members of the BD, whose characteristics are summarized below (see Table 1) in order to increase transparency and contextual understanding of the party, which might shed light on the arguments in the following chapters.

Table 1. Information on the Interviewees

	GENDER	POSITION WITHIN THE PARTY	PAST AFFILIATIONS	ON/OFF DUTY (December 8, 2024)
Interviewee 1	Male	Member of BD, GİK + FM	MHP, İYİP	Off duty
Interviewee 2	Male	Member of BD, GİK + FM	MHP, İYİP	On duty
Interviewee 3	Male	Member of BD, GİK	-	On duty
Interviewee 4	Female	Member of BD, GİK + FM	-	Off duty

Interviewee 5	Female	Member of BD,	-	Changed title
		GİK		
Interviewee 6	Male	Member of BD,	MHP, İYİP	Changed title
		GİK + FM		
Interviewee 7	Male	Member of BD,	MHP, İYİP	On duty
		GİK + FM		

1.2.2. The Interviews

The duration of the interviews ranged between 30 to 90 minutes, and all of the respondents expressed their consent to record as I assured confidentiality. Every participant also indicated that they are not afraid of anyone and as a result, were willing to provide consent for their names to be disclosed. All of the interviewees were eager to help my research and take part in it, expressing their hope for an academic work properly introducing the party. They reiterated their support for me as a young researcher and part of the future of Turkey. It was also continuously brought into attention that students are particularly welcomed in the party, as most of the members have experience with them thanks to their academic background as professors. As a result, most of the interviews were conducted without pre-determining the allocated time and the participants letting me know when they had to leave. Besides one, I could ask all my questions to each participant.

My questions were grouped into three main sections to reveal the party organization, ideological background and party's stance on immigration. The groups were deliberately limited to three considering potential time constraints. Yet, as the interviews were semi-structured, I had additional questions that might be relevant for the course of discussions. In the first section, my questions were on identifying the participant and their duty in the party, as well as the reason why the party was established and used the torch as a symbol. Also, considering how the party earned its early reputation, I asked about the reason why there were not any members in the BD dealing with the immigration policies specifically. The second part was designed to understand ideological leanings within the party, to see if it resembles a similar ideological background with the radical right parties in connection with the literature.

In the third part, questions were on immigration policies and revealing the anti-immigrant stance that ZP was associated with. The additional questions were aimed at analyzing the party's stance beyond immigration within the frame of radical right party family, and thus, they touch upon media's role in politics, civil society organizations, economic policies, policy convergence and international connections.

As discussed above, my main aim is to explore how the ZP engages with the immigration issue in the Turkish political context, and to what extent this shows similarities to the radical right parties as a broader phenomenon. In doing so, this work presents a descriptive approach, to qualify for a comprehensive and introductory work on the party. Having prepared the interview questions based on my take on the radical right party literature and nationalism in Turkey, the flexibility provided by the semi-structured method allowed me not to get bounded with pre-existing theoretical framework. After completing the interviews, I analyzed them using thematic analysis to find thought patterns and motifs through mapping the aspects interviewees and Ümit Özdağ repetitively mentioned (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Considering the descriptive nature of my study, I analyzed the data at a "semantic level" and worked on what is said explicitly, rather than trying to interpret the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations that shape or inform the content as in "latent level" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84).

In the following chapters I first provide a historical background of the ZP and later build on the radical right theoretical framework explained above. To elaborate, in Chapter 2, I trace the political trajectory of the ZP starting from its origins in MHP and İYİP due to the founding members' earlier political affiliations. The chapter then examines ZP's emergence as a niche movement and situates it within the broader party politics literature, to see if it is a rupture from the mainstream far-right in Turkey. Chapter 3 offers an extensive debate on the anti-immigrant stance that the party established, and Chapter 4 continues with the broader political agenda proposed by the party. Given that ZP portrays immigration as the country's most pressing issue and offers substantial material on the topic, I divided the chapters accordingly, trying to reflect the party's own emphasis and identity. While Chapter 2 also relies on interview data, Chapter 3 presents a more extensive use of the semi-structured interviews and field research, while Chapter 4 mainly relies on party program and

manifest along with the interviews. Finally, Chapter 5 brings the study to a close by outlining the key findings, discussing their relevance to the wider literature on party politics, and proposing directions for future research.



CHAPTER 2

CONTINUITY OR RUPTURE? THE ORIGINS AND CURRENT TRAJECTORY OF THE VICTORY PARTY

This chapter elaborates on the historical trajectory of the Victory Party (ZP) by tracing the past political affiliations of its leading figures. In doing so, it explores the broader political context that facilitated the party's emergence, as well as the motivations that shaped its foundation. A key focus is to assess whether the ZP represents a rupture from or a continuation of the Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP) nationalist tradition, given that a significant number of high-ranking ZP officials began their political careers within the MHP. Accordingly, the first part of the chapter traces the timeline from Ümit Özdağ's departure from the MHP, through his role in the formation of the Good Party (*İYİ Parti*, İYİP), to the internal disputes within İYİP that ultimately resulted in the establishment of the ZP. The second part examines the current trajectory of the party, aiming to situate and classify it within broader party families and typologies.

2.1. The Origins: Split from the MHP and İYİ Party

Having taken over the leadership of MHP in 1997 when the former MHP cadres were divided between the modern, urban Ülkücüs, who remained within the MHP, and the traditional conservative members, some of whom moved into the Grand Unity Party (*Büyük Birlik Partisi*, BBP), Devlet Bahçeli faced another turbulence within the party nearly 20 years later. Seeking balance between the two camps and strict control over the members, his appeal as the ultimate leader of the Ülkücü movement was shaken as a result of decreasing electoral popularity by mid-2010s and his authority increasingly came under question. Particularly after the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP) outperformed the MHP in the 2015 elections,

both the party's electorate and cadres grew increasingly disillusioned (Karaçalık, 2024). In the end, the rival was a party representing the segments of society aligned with the Kurdish Initiative that had long been targeted by the MHP. Bahçeli's apparent refusal to assume responsibility, coupled with his dismissive stance, proved to be the final straw that broke the camel's back. By November 30, 2015, nearly a month after the general election on November 1, prominent figures within the party called for an extraordinary congress, openly seeking to elect a new leadership (Anadolu Agency, 2016; BBC, 2016).

The opposition leaders were Meral Akşener, Sinan Oğan, and Koray Aydın, whose names would frequently be mentioned in Turkish political life in the following years. They were later joined by Ümit Özdağ in February 2016 and announced their candidacies for the party leadership (Daily Sabah, 2016). While this was a turbulent period for the MHP, triggered by the poor electoral performance, it led to a bigger turmoil due to the opposition's vocal critics in the decision-making process within the party that lacked democracy. Having already faced a challenge to his authority within the party, Bahçeli encountered a second setback when he ignored the call for an extraordinary congress that were prohibited by the party constitution, and was subsequently confronted with demands to amend the party constitution itself. These demands found support in the form of a sufficient number of signatures, thereby opening the door to an extraordinary congress. Yet, the leadership was determinant on maintaining their stance, which only led opposition to take the issue to court. The legal battle was marked by an indecisive trial process leading to a deadlock particularly after the precautionary injunctions issued by two local Courts of First Instance in Tosya and Gemerek in May 2016 (Interviewee 6, 25 November 2024). Although the Court of Appeals made a decision favoring the opposition and an extraordinary congress was held in June 2016 (Anadolu Agency, 2016), a year later in June 2017 the congress was annulled. For some, this lengthy process was the clearest sign of the Justice and Development Party's (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) help to maintain his control over the MHP (Karaçalık, 2024).

Starting from the recurring elections in 2015, not only the MHP was shaken by both external and internal shocks, but Turkish politics also underwent a dramatic transformation. First, the failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016, considerably disrupted

the progress and strength of the opposition movement within the MHP. Meral Akşener, a key opposition figure, had already been accused by party leader Devlet Bahçeli of being affiliated with the Fethullah Gülen movement. During the contentious congress period, Bahçeli and pro-government media portrayed the entire opposition camp as a Gülenist conspiracy to take over the party (Daily Sabah, 2016). This led to legal actions, including the arrest of a judge who ruled in favor of the opposition. Despite his earlier opposition, Bahçeli's unexpected proposal regarding the presidential system in late 2016 and support for a passing a constitutional amendment package enhancing President Erdoğan's powers escalated the negative reactions among MHP supporters. The efforts of opposition figures, including all four leadership candidates, against the presidential system were hindered by the state of emergency, established following the coup attempt ("Akşener'den Yeniçağ'a", 2016, as cited in Karaçalık, 2024). Highlighting the increasingly repressive political environment in Turkey, wider opposition experienced crackdowns on dissent, and frequent harassment, bans, and physical attacks, including the annulment of the MHP's extraordinary party congress in 2017.

The annulment was an obvious beginning of the end. Following the annulment decision, Akşener said the MHP chapter was closed for her and it was time for an alternative party for the wider nationalist electorate ("Akşener: MHP defteri", 2017, as cited in Karaçalık, 2024). Ümit Özdağ, also expelled from MHP following Akşener, supported this idea admitting her appeal to the electorate facilitated by her political career and background (Özbey, 2017). As a result, the İYİP was founded on October 25, 2017, with Meral Akşener assuming the role of party leader and Ümit Özdağ and Koray Aydın among its founding members. The party had several symbolic references to Turkishness, with using the seal logo of a medieval Turkic tribe *Kayı* and a yellow sun with eight rays as the party logo based on the sun's role in Turkish mythology and history (Karaçalık, 2024). From İYİP's establishment onwards, party officials increasingly relied on a rhetoric highlighting the sense of duty that the Turkish people imposed on them as dedicated supporters of democracy (Karaçalık, 2024). Placing themselves on the political spectrum as a center-right party and identifying with nationalism, İYİP not very surprisingly presented itself as the embodiment of the Turkish people and a representative of their will.

Although the expectations were higher than reality, İYİP managed to gain deputies and increased its popularity following the snap elections in 2018. Nevertheless, history repeating itself, Akşener, too, faced challenges to her leadership. In the 2018 general and presidential elections, Akşener, who was also the İYİP candidate for the presidency, scored less than her party. As a result, until the local elections in March 2019, 20 founding members resigned from the party with very similar complaints as were heard during their opposition within the MHP. When it was the time for a second ordinary congress in September 2020, an even deeper inner turmoil emerged within the İYİP, resulting in the expulsion of prominent members including Ümit Özdağ. It was later revealed that a secret list composed of delegate names was distributed to prevent members from voting for them in the General Executive Board elections (Interviewee 7, 26 November 2024). This was met with great anger by the delegates at stake and their supporters. Interviewee 7 reflected on this period as a repetition of what had been experienced within the MHP regarding the marginalization of certain prominent members as a result of secret groupings within the party (26 November 2024). According to the Interviewee 7, it was also a sign of outsiders, as the Gülenist movement or loaded businessmen, taking over the İYİP. Özdağ, for the second time, was one of such marginalized members particularly due to his strong opinions on the Syrian migration flow at the time. On the other hand, Akşener was adamantly refraining from addressing the issue, viewing it as an insignificant matter (Interviewee 7, 26 November 2024).

By the time İYİP also suffered from internal conflicts that Özdağ complained, Turkey was receiving an ongoing migration flow from Syria following the uprisings triggered by the Arab Spring in 2011. In 2014, the Turkish Directorate General of Migration Management (*Göç İdaresi Genel Müdürlüğü*, now changed to Presidency of Migration Management – *Göç İdaresi Başkanlığı*) prepared the Law No.6458 on Foreigners and International Protection that defines a legal status for the immigrants of Syrian origin as the Syrians Under Temporary Protection (SuTP). This was a status going one step further of the international law defining international protection, refugee, asylum-seeker, and immigrant, and an initial mark of a possible long-term stay. By early 2020s, hundreds of thousands of Syrians were already living in Turkey for nearly 10 years and it seemed like the number would increase following the 2016 EU – Turkey Deal. With this agreement, Turkey had consolidated its role as a

gatekeeper for the EU regarding the migration flow towards Europe and formally agreed on welcoming one Syrian to Turkey for every other one that enters in the EU zone, in addition to the ones who are already living here. This agreement was also a mark of Syrians' long-term stay, which lasts to this day.

2.2. Founding of the ZP

Within that political context, the ZP entered the Turkish political scene on August 26, 2021, positioning immigration as its primary focus and opposing the presence of millions of immigrants and asylum seekers in the country. The party's anti-immigrant discourse had an increasing effect on public discourse on refugees, which was previously aligned with the AKP rhetoric, appealing to the Muslim identity of the public. Accordingly, AKP used an analogy drawing parallels between the Syrian refugees and Prophet Mohammad and his followers, who migrated from Mecca to Medina due to religious persecution. In this analogy, Syrian refugees are illustrated as *muhacir* (the Islamic word referring to the Prophet and followers, also the Arabic word for migrant) while the Turkish people are *ensar* (the population of Medina who welcomed the migrating Muslims) (Karakaya Polat, 2018). This rhetoric, repressing the anti-immigrant sentiments thanks to AKP's dominance over media was further facilitated by MHP's soft stance regarding immigration. In fact, immigration was rarely subjected to discussion in the parliamentary group meetings between 2011 and 2021 (Balta, Elçi and Sert, 2022), while the overall tone of migration debates moved toward a negative tone among the mainstream parties as the ZP voiced rising public concerns about refugees (Balta, Elçi and Sert, 2023). Following MHP's entry to the People's Alliance with the AKP and moderation observed in its anti-immigrant stance, the ZP's emergence in 2021 backfired, pushing MHP further toward a pro-immigrant tone (Balta, Elçi and Sert, 2023). The salience of refugee issue in Bahçeli's speeches dramatically decreased in the following period. Bahçeli's and the MHP's long-term silence on the future of immigrants in Turkey is going to be the main factor that distinguishes the ZP from its origins.

With the emergence of the ZP and the nativist, strict anti-immigrant discourse criticizing the government's immigration policy, the anti-immigrant public found a new venue to express their discontent. The party agenda promoting forced return, referring to immigration as invasion, emphasizing economic, cultural and security

threats posed by the refugee population was embraced by an increasing number of people. As public interest in anti-immigrant policies increased, mainstream parties in particular adjusted their rhetoric to reflect a more hardline stance on immigration. Significantly the İYİP began framing immigration as an urgent issue and adopted a tougher stance, in contrast to its earlier emphasis on burden-sharing for safe return and international cooperation. In the end, AKP policies and ZP's stance on immigration now represented the two opposite edges of the political spectrum ranging between pro-immigrant, open door policies, on the one hand, and nativist anti-immigrant agenda on the other.

The ZP emerged as a collaborative effort among academics, bureaucrats, retired military officials, and politicians within the framework of the *21. Yüzyıl Türkiye Enstitüsü* (21st Century Turkey Institute), which served as the intellectual hub, or 'kitchen', of the ZP as Interviewee 7 described it (26 November 2024). While the professions of those who took place in this kitchen prove that the issue was securitized, this is not surprising considering the academic and family background of Ümit Özdağ as a professor of national security and strategy, and whose father was a well-known figure in the Turkish army. Ümit Özdağ, born in 1961 in Tokyo, Japan during his father's political exile, is a Turkish academic and politician whose career spans academia, strategic research, and nationalist politics. After completing his early education in Ankara, he pursued undergraduate and graduate studies in political science and philosophy at Ludwig Maximilians University in Munich, writing his master's thesis on Turkey's State Planning Organization² (Zafer Partisi, n.d.). He earned his PhD in political science at Gazi University in 1990, focusing on civil-military relations in early republican Turkey (Zafer Partisi, n.d.).

By the mid-1990s, Özdağ had become a prominent figure in Turkish strategic studies, founding the *Avrasya Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi* (Eurasian Strategic Research Center, ASAM) in 1999 and the *21. Yüzyıl Türkiye Enstitüsü* in 2005, while also lecturing and conducting seminars not only at Gazi University, where he served as a faculty member, but also at a range of prestigious state institutions including the

² He integrates this expertise into the party's program and manifesto, emphasizing the importance of the State Planning Organization and the party's commitment to re-establishing it (Zafer Partisi, 2021a, p. 29; Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 44).

Military Academy, Police Academy, Intelligence Department, National Security Academy, and the Ministry of Interior (Özdağ, 2021; Zafer Partisi, n.d.). Ümit Özdağ began his political involvement during high school and, following his academic training in Germany, returned to Turkey and contributed to the nationalist Ülkü Ocakları movement between 1992 and 1994 by lecturing to a special education group under the instruction of Alparslan Türkeş. His formal entry into active politics came in 2003, when he announced his candidacy for the leadership of the MHP. Özdağ combines a vision of state reform with a populist-nationalist political style shaped by his academic and ideological formation (Zafer Partisi, n.d). His academic background is reflected in a technocratic orientation, embodied in the party's slogan "Bilim, Birlik, Barış" ("Science, Unity, Peace"), which sheds light on the foundations upon which the ZP constructs its identity.

The 21st Century Turkey Institute was established by Ümit Özdağ as a center for strategic studies on Turkey and Turks from everywhere (21. Yüzyıl Türkiye Enstitüsü, n.d.a). With the aforementioned team, the Institute started to work on the Syrians in Turkey in 2019 and formed a *Strateji Kurulu* (Strategic Board) and a platform called "*Suriyeliler Suriye'ye*" ("Syrians to Syria") (Interviewee 7, 26 November 2024). The board was mainly concerned with creating awareness among the Turkish nation regarding the effects and threats of Syrian migration to Turkey in terms of economics, politics, demography and national security. With extensive research, the Board first clarified and highlighted the legal status of the Syrians, which was not widely known by the public (Interviewee 7, 26 November 2024). With a workshop under İYİP's roof, the initial results of the studies were presented to a smaller audience by the end of 2019 (Interviewee 7, 26 November 2024). But within a few months, the inner turmoil within the İYİP escalated as discussed above and the officials who were concerned with refugees left the party for founding ZP. In the end, the legal framework put forward by the Institute was popularized later with the ZP propaganda.

The party was founded by a group of politicians whose earlier political trajectories were shaped within the far-right MHP and, subsequently, the center-right İYİP. As former members of the MHP, founding members of ZP aimed at founding a political party centering on nationalism and having a "consistent rhetoric", thereby implying that the MHP, BBP and the İYİP were not consistent in their adherence to nationalist

principles. In fact, party officials famously define ZP as the party of all those who define themselves as Turkish nationalists in line with Atatürk's principles (Interviewee 3, 22 November 2024; Zafer Partisi, 2021a; 2021b). In doing so, the party aims to gain support of a broader electorate who sympathize with nationalist ideas, regardless of whether they are relatively conservative or secular. Compared to the nationalist discourse constructed by the MHP on the basis of the Turkish-Islamic synthesis, and later softened by the İYİ Party in an effort to maintain a center-right position by reducing references to Islam, the conception of nationalism that the ZP seeks to establish places a stronger emphasis on Turkishness/Turkish identity and avoids Islamic references. In this context, it can be argued that the understanding of nationalism has evolved from a Turkish-Islamic synthesis (as seen in the MHP), to a more secular, Turkish-centered ideology in the transition from the MHP to İYİP, and from the İYİP to ZP. Thus, although the ZP is founded mainly by cadres from within the MHP, it ruptured from the mainstream far-right nationalist path and established a new one. This is not only the result of their understanding of nationalism but also their trajectory towards the radical right, which will be examined in the following part.

2.3. The Current Trajectory: Identifying the ZP's Position

The ZP in its party documents refers to four main crises currently facing Turkey: a state crisis, a national unity crisis, an economic crisis, and a refugee crisis. According to the party, each of these issues stems from the ineffective and incompetent government of the AKP over the past 23 years. The state crisis, to begin with, is attributed to the infiltration of Gülenist forces into the Turkish bureaucracy and the gradual dismantling of the parliamentary system between 2002 and 2016 (Zafer Partisi, 2021a; 2021b). These developments are seen as contributing to the consolidation of authoritarian, one-man rule and the erosion of Turkey's democratic institutions. The emergence of an authoritarian regime, in turn, has intensified societal polarization along religious, cultural, and socioeconomic lines, leading to what the ZP describes as a national unity crisis (Zafer Partisi, 2021a; 2021b). Citizens have become increasingly alienated from one another, losing their sense of shared emotional and civic experience – a unity that, according to the party, had characterized the Turkish Republic since its founding (Zafer Partisi, 2021b). Simultaneously, rising corruption and mismanaged economic policies, designed to sustain authoritarianism and clientelism, have led to a deep economic crisis. Citizens

now face low wages, high unemployment, and a growing desire to emigrate from Turkey in search of better opportunities. The ZP further argues that Turkey is being economically reduced to the status of an internal colony, drawing a parallel with the historical *Düyun-u Umumiye* period, during which national sovereignty was subordinated to external debt management (Zafer Partisi, 2021a; 2021b). According to the ZP, this dynamic erodes the public's relationship with productive labor and weakens the national work ethic (Zafer Partisi, 2021a; 2021b). Finally, the refugee crisis is framed as the most urgent of all. The party claims that mass migration has led to a covert demographic invasion, threatening both Turkey's national identity and its societal cohesion, as it triggers the three crises listed above (Zafer Partisi, 2021a; 2021b). As the host of the world's largest refugee population, Turkey is portrayed as heading toward a civil war scenario within the next few decades, particularly if the refugee population outnumbers that of native citizens within 25 years (Zafer Partisi, 2021a).

Having identified these four crises, the ZP asserts that neither the ruling government nor the opposition parties have offered viable solutions. On the contrary, it claims that the AKP deepens these crises, while the opposition remains passive. Therefore, the party presents itself as the only political force capable of breaking this downward spiral – stating that it allies solely with the Turkish Nation³ and seeks to lead it to new victories (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 32). This vision, the party maintains, can only be realized by returning to reason, science, and the founding principles of the Turkish Republic, guided by a competent and courageous bureaucratic cadre committed to national sovereignty (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 32). While these statements provide insight into the party's self-image, a deeper understanding of its identity emerges through a closer reading of the party's manifesto and program. Accordingly, symbolic acts play a key role in shaping the ZP's public image. The ZP presents itself as the party of Turkish nationalists and emphasizes Turkish identity over Muslim identity, in contrast to the MHP. In doing so, it employs historical and cultural narratives that sacralize elements of Turkish identity. To evoke nationalist sentiments, the party draws on figures such as Mehmet Akif, Ahmet Yesevi, and Hacı Bektaş Veli, weaving

³ From this point onward, Turkish Nation will appear with both a capitalized “N” and a lowercase “n.” The capitalized form reflects the ZP's usage in official documents, while the lowercase refers to the general use of the term.

them into a broader story about Turkish continuity and sovereignty (Zafer Partisi, 2021a). The party makes references to Başbuğ Alparslan Türkeş as well, claiming that he is the leader who sustained the idea of Turkish unity after Atatürk (Zafer Partisi, 2021a).

According to the party's manifesto, its founding process began with a series of symbolic visits. On May 19, 2021, the anniversary of the start of the Turkish War of Independence, a group of politicians known as the Ayyıldız Movement visited Anıtkabir, and subsequently traveled to Yesi, Kazakhstan which they regard as the ancestral homeland of the Turks (Zafer Partisi, 2021a). As a marker of symbolism, the term "Ayyıldız" references the crescent and the star on the Turkish flag, reinforcing the symbolic linkage between these visits and Turkish national identity. The party interprets these visits as signifying the origins of Turkishness and the continuity of Turkish presence in Anatolia (Zafer Partisi, 2021a). After paying homage to Ahmet Yesevi, the delegation brought soil from his shrine in Yesi to Anatolia and placed it under the black mulberry tree near the shrine of Hacı Bektaş Veli. This act was drawn on a foundational myth of Turkish spiritual heritage: when Hacı Bektaş Veli asked Ahmet Yesevi where he should establish his dervish lodge, according to the legend, Yesevi threw a burning branch from Yesi to Anatolia, which took root and grew into a black mulberry tree (Zafer Partisi, 2021a). As long as that tree bears fruit, the legend goes, Turkish sovereignty in Anatolia will endure. By recreating this narrative and transferring soil from Yesi to Anatolia, the ZP aims to symbolically guarantee that the tree – and thus, Turkish presence – will continue to thrive for the next thousand years (Zafer Partisi, 2021a; 2021b). Drawing from this story, party officials incorporate the following message into their public discourse: the Turks have existed in Anatolia for the past thousand years, and they will continue to exist here for the next thousand as well. This, as Elgenius (2019) suggests, shows how a nationalist narrative plays a role in claiming legitimacy and authority, together with political history.

After all these visits and preparations were complete, the official founding of the ZP was marked by the deliberate choice of another symbolic date: August 26, 2021. This date coincides with the anniversaries of both the Battle of Manzikert in 1071 and the launch of the Great Offensive during the Turkish War of Independence in 1922 – two historically significant military operations that secured lasting Turkish presence in

Anatolia (Zafer Partisi, 2021a). By selecting this date, the party invokes a historical continuity, framing its own emergence as the beginning of a new struggle on behalf of the Turkish Nation – one that, like its predecessors, is destined to end in triumph and preserve Turkish sovereignty for another millennium. As the party's founding documents emphasize, this modern battle is against imperialism, which they claim now takes the form of mass migration (Zafer Partisi, 2021a). This parallel is explicitly drawn in the party manifesto, which states: “One year after Mehmet Akif’s address 99 years ago, on August 26, 1922, the Turkish Army launched the Great Offensive and drove the mercenary army of imperialism into the sea. Our War of Independence ended in a great victory” (Zafer Partisi, 2021a, p. 5). Framing the present as a continuation of past resistance, the party claims: “Today, a century after our War of Independence, imperialism is once again attacking our country... through a form of strategic migration engineering resembling a modern-day invasion” (p. 6). Actually, the name of the party is an explicit reference to a string of victories in the Turkish past, which the ZP wants to top with a third.

Drawing parallels between the past and present, the ZP establishes an identity rooted in historical continuity and clearly defines its core principles around nationalism, republican ideals, and democracy. The party articulates its primary goal as restoring the Turkish Republic to its former democratic, independent, and prosperous condition, marked by a strong rule of law and national well-being (Zafer Partisi, 2021a; 2021b). Achieving this, according to the party, necessitates the reinforcement of the unitary state and the effective coordination between central and local authorities under the universal principles of democracy (Zafer Partisi, 2021b). The restoration of strength – here defined by strong democracy, independence and prosperity – narrative aligns with Rydgren’s (2018) definition of ethnic nationalism (see Chapter 1.1), while it also reflects the theory of creating dominant assumptions about nations using historical narrations (Spillman, 1997). Central to this vision is the re-introduction of a parliamentary system, which the party views as essential for ensuring the separation of powers and enabling broader political participation. In such a framework, the representation of diverse social groups is expected to grow naturally. This is illustrated in their assertion that “No one shall be subjected to discrimination based on their chosen way of life, and their private life shall not be interfered with” (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 36). While this signals a commitment to individual liberties,

including freedoms of religion, conscience, and expression, the party notably avoids referencing ethnicity, race, or gender within its language of inclusion. In other words, while this outward commitment to civic principles appears inclusive, the deeper articulation of national identity in the party's discourse reveals more complex and often contradictory nationalist foundations, particularly concerning the refugees.

The party defines the nation in formally civic terms, asserting, "Everyone who is bound to the Turkish Nation by the bond of citizenship is a part of the Turkish Nation" (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 37). This echoes Atatürk's nationalism as reflected in the phrase "*Ne mutlu Türküm diyene!*" ("How happy is the one who says 'I am a Turk'"). As Ümit Özdağ declared in a public statement on November 27, 2022: "Everyone who sees themselves as part of the Turkish Nation, who rejoices when the Turkish national team wins and grieves when it loses, whose heart aches when a disaster strikes Turkey and who celebrates when good things happen, who is bound to this nation with loyalty, is a beloved descendant of this nation." This definition emphasizes emotional and symbolic affinity alongside ethnonational belonging.

However, this civic framing is complicated by additional emphasis on Turkish language, a glorious history, rich culture, and love for Islam and the homeland shared by the members of Turkish Nation. Interviewee 1 explains their understanding of nationalism as "What is important are unity of lineage, homeland, ideals, history, and state", which often framed against the refugee population (18 April 2024). For one, the party argues that the bond of citizenship is insufficient to include the refugees within the national community, framing their presence as a consequence of misguided government policies and a broader political agenda that allegedly serves imperialist interests (Zafer Partisi, 2021a; 2021b). Even when migrants obtain legal status – as is the case for Syrians under Temporary Protection – this is portrayed as insufficient, since they are not subject to the same taxes, rules, and obligations as Turkish citizens. In the party's discourse, Syrians are depicted as receiving preferential treatment in various aspects of social and economic life, in contrast to Turkish citizens, who are said to deserve these benefits by virtue of paying taxes, working for the nation, and fulfilling civic responsibilities. This rhetoric echoes the logic of the principle "no taxation without representation", but departs from liberal democratic theory by grounding legitimacy not in civic participation, but in nationalist and nativist claims.

Thus, even if Syrians were to meet formal expectations of contribution and compliance, the party insists that “actual” Turkish citizens should always be prioritized and distinguished from non-natives.

Second, within the glorious history of Turks the standard of belonging is built on glorious (military) victories, which refugees lack as they are not Turkish descendants, their ancestors did not fight for the future of this country and they do not serve in the Turkish military (Interviewee 2, 22 November 2024). As discussed in Chapter 1.1, such emphasis on cultural and ancestral commonality aligns more closely with ethnic nationalism, and justifies exclusionary policies (Gellner, 1983). In the party manifest, such ethnic nationalist sentiments become consolidated particularly when historical figures like Ahmet Yesevi and Hacı Bektaş Veli are referenced using myths of a strong and ideal national past. Referring to these figures as leaders who shaped Muslim Turkish identity (Zafer Partisi, 2021a, p. 2) introduces Muslim identity as a foundational element, although in a limited and symbolic way. In fact, the party avoids overt references to religion in its broader rhetoric, reflecting an attempt to distinguish Turkish identity from that of the refugee population by dismissing commonalities, and thereby reinforcing the exclusionary logic of ethnic nationalism. By downplaying this connection, the party also adopts a secular stance that diverges from MHP’s mainstream nationalism built on Turkish Islamic Synthesis (see Chapter 2.1). Drawing upon the identified crises – here, a particular emphasis put on national unity crisis – it becomes evident that the nationalist rhetoric becomes a significant part of the ZP discourse, which is based on historical narration and symbolism, supporting its claims about national identity, solidarity and unity (Spillman, 1997). The party discourse also points toward ethnic homogeneity, entitlement and earned membership (Elgenius and Rydgren, 2022) based on citizenship, underlining the ‘one nation, one community and one identity’ narrative (Billig, 1995; Elgenius, 2011).

A further inconsistency appears in the party program, which states that no one shall be discriminated against on the basis of sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, sect, or political opinion (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 37). Despite this, as explored in Chapter 3, ethnicity emerges as a central theme in the party’s exclusionary discourse targeting refugees. The overall strategy of the party is ‘positive self-representation and negative other-representation’ in which *their* bad things are emphasized against *our* good

things, which might as well be unchangeable (van Dijk, 2001, p. 103). First, party officials seek to emphasize what they perceive as weaknesses inherent in the refugee population, while carefully avoiding language that would cross the line from ethnic nationalism into racism (Hargreaves & Leaman, 1995). In the party manifesto, this perceived weakness is illustrated with the following statement: “They will be freed from an environment where the quality of education has declined because teachers have had to reduce the educational standard so that Syrian students can follow the lessons” (Zafer Partisi, 2021a, p. 14) (Also mentioned in Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 50). Regarding the ethnicity discussions, by also invoking a mythologized narrative asserting that Anatolia has always belonged to the Turks, the party claims, “Turkey belongs to the Turks” (Zafer Partisi, 2021a, p. 8), and advocates for the return of growing refugee populations to their countries of origin. The party legitimizes this belonging relying on the long history of Turks as well, by stating that “In other words, if you take the Turkish and Chinese nations out of world history, there is hardly any world history left” (Interviewee 2, 22 November 2024). Nevertheless, despite these efforts, such statements may evoke racist sentiments by implying ancestral or even civilizational superiority (Brubaker, 2017) over present-day societies due to historical longevity.

The demographic anxiety surrounding low Turkish birth rates, as opposed to high birth rates of refugee population, is also frequently mentioned in articulating this belonging (Zafer Partisi, 2021b). This rhetoric aligns with securitizing migration and portrays the Turkish nation as a declining majority, thus legitimizing calls to restore national strength through ethnic and cultural homogeneity. In doing so, the ZP depicts itself as the true representative of the dominant ethnic group, promising re-gaining national strength and fulfilling its destiny in line with Rydgren’s (2018) framework of ethnic nationalism.

Linking these dynamics to the radical right framework discussed in Chapter 1.1 (*What is Radical Right?*), the party’s support for democracy and procedural governance is followed by a rejection of multiculturalism and cultural liberalism. Its selective embrace of liberal democratic values remains limited in advocating pluralism when it is perceived as a threat to national unity and homogeneity. Thus, although the party defines the nation in civic terms, its actual discourse and practices – as evidence from

manifesto, program, and interviews suggest – reflect a de facto ethnic nationalism. The party refrains from using the term “ethnicity” directly, but its focus on demographic incompatibility, with references to the inherent inferiorities, and spoiled homogeneity constructs a binary between “native” Turks and non-assimilable “others” consisting of particularly Syrians and Afghans (Interviewee 2, 22 November 2024; Interviewee 7, 26 November 2024).

Historically, assimilation has been a common strategy in nationalist policies. As a more recent example that inspired the interview questions addressing assimilation as an option, European welfare states introduced the European Social Project promoting social and economic integration based on individual work and active citizenship of the immigrants (Soysal, 2012)⁴. The project was centered around national integration policies pushing immigrants to acquire the necessary skills to adapt and participate in the economic, cultural, social and civic life of host country through language and civic education programs to access social benefits (Soysal, 2012). Essentially, it resembles an assimilation process serving to protect the homogeneity, which is defined in ethnic nationalist terms. These efforts, however, largely ceased during the Syrian migration *crisis* [sic]. Similarly, the ZP dismisses assimilation or integration as viable options in Turkey, arguing that refugees are culturally different and incompatible with Turkish society and unwilling to integrate. According to party officials, refugees aim not to adapt but to dominate, even going so far as to claim plans to establish an independent Kurdistan in Southeastern Turkey (Interviewee 2, 22 November 2024; Interviewee 3, 22 November 2024; Interviewee 7, 26 November 2024). This framing portrays refugees as a non-integrated co-citizen upon the inherent other-ness against the native population (Newth, 2023), which paradoxically limits integration policies, consistent with the nativist agenda.

⁴ European welfare states introduced the European Social Project within efforts to integrate immigrants particularly in the early 2000s. Due to escalating fear of terror after 9/11 incident, this integration process was seen as a way of undermining the identity that might be associated with terrorism. Of course, it should be reminded that back then Europe was not the target of mass immigration flows until the Arab Spring and particularly, Syrian Civil War. Following the possibility of Syrian migration, the European was to initiate the EU-Turkey Deal (2016) and ensure their stay within Turkish borders. Therefore, integration was a policy for a controllable number of immigrants rather than those who fled their countries in masses.

The inherent other-ness in the refugee population is a consequence of fundamental cultural differences. The party's arguments on cultural difference are rooted in depictions of refugee lifestyles and traditions (Interviewee 5, 25 November 2025), such as extended families living in small spaces, high birth rates, and living in isolated communities – or *ghettos* as the party claims. These practices are portrayed as threats to social cohesion, which are also paradoxically results of failure in integration policies. More importantly, the party argues that refugees make no effort to integrate, as for instance, they rely on Arabic rather than learning Turkish and communicating through family members who speaks Turkish or insisting on dictating their culture and tradition to the host community (Interviewee 3, 22 November 2024; Interviewee 5, 2024). The presence of Arabic shop signs in neighborhoods, where they ghettoize and Turkish is scarcely spoken, is framed as a marker of the aforementioned covert invasion (Ümit Özdağ, X entries on 20 July 2023; 5 August 2023). For nationalists, language is often regarded as an embodiment of the national spirit and serves as a concrete marker of distinction between nations, thereby acquiring significant symbolic and political importance (Aytürk, 2006). In some cases, language even surpasses ancestry in defining national identity, functioning as the historical and cultural repository of nations and ethnic groups (Herder, n.d., as cited in Aytürk, 2006). Drawing on this ideological background, the ZP uses language to assert the impossibility of any sociocultural path to integration or shared identity, framing ethnic homogeneity as a necessity (Ümit Özdağ, 2022).

Another key aspect of the ZP's discourse regarding cultural difference focuses on crimes allegedly committed by refugees and their predisposition to commit crimes. This narrative strengthens claims of sociocultural incompatibility while also depicting refugees as a security threat. The security threat argument is framed using constant war analogies both in the party manifest and party officials' discourses, drawing parallels with the Battle of Manzikert and Great Offensive. The party officials identify party's establishment as the start of a war against imperialism, which in the first place brought refugees to Turkey. The war analogies are followed and further strengthened by statements like "Many of my fellow comrades in struggle declared that they wished to take on the role of deputy chair in our party, which was in the process of being established, in order to fight at the forefront" (Zafer Partisi, 2021a, p. 41). The vulnerability that this war-like environment creates is furthered by other threats, such

as the diseases Syrians and Afghans reintroduced into Turkey that had been eradicated after long struggles (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 51). While these analogies might alert the Turkish nation to seek help, the ZP meets the need and finds a fertile ground to depict itself as the defender of the nation against such threats within the populist framework (Erçetin & Erdoğan, 2023; Schilk, 2025).

Framing the refugees as a security threat aligns with the party's xenophobic and nativist narrative as well. Party officials frequently express that Turkish citizens should fear refugees, drawing upon the violent acts which is framed as a result of Arabic identity with occasional racist undertones. For example, the manifesto reads: "Turkey is being filled with the waste of the Middle East – individuals who have not even completed primary school and shout threatening slogans like "I'll behead you, bro" (Zafer Partisi, 2021a, p. 14). Such statements not only criminalize all the refugees, whose number hit 8 million in 2021, as the party claimed (Zafer Partisi, 2021a, p. 11) but also attribute certain inferiorities to the Arabic identity. Therefore, it creates a fearful war-like environment, where people need a savior, as expected by the use of war analogies. In this environment, the party positions itself as the protector of citizens, citing specific victims of refugee-related crimes and portraying itself as the defender of the Turkish people in their own country (Erçetin & Erdoğan, 2023). Despite this obvious othering, the party simultaneously claims: "Racism is being committed against the Turkish Nation" (Zafer Partisi, 2021a, p. 9), flipping the victim narrative in favor of the Turkish nation and legitimizing its stance.

The populist definition of 'us vs them' underpinning the party's discourse reinforces this binary. Populist radical right rhetoric around the world defines outsiders (i.e. 'them') as enemies, who should be deprived of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2007). It also constructs a moral division between a virtuous 'people' and corrupt 'elites' as well as the 'cultural outsiders' and 'native population' (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2007; Morgül, 2022). The ZP's narrative reflects both: first, 'us' – the Turkish Nation – against 'them' – the ruling elites who facilitated mass migration as stated by inclusionary populism; and second, 'us' – native Turks – against 'them' – the refugee populations as stated by exclusionary populism. These two discourses converge in the party's discourse accusing the AKP's open-door policies for mass influx of refugees, which are

portrayed as serving foreign rather than national interests. Consistent with the populist rhetoric, the party claims to represent the true will of the Turkish nation and states: “Like 90% of the Turkish Nation, an overwhelming majority wants Syrians to return to Syria, Afghans to Afghanistan, Iraqis to Iraq, and Iranians to Iran. The Turkish Nation is aware that our country is being covertly invaded” (Zafer Partisi, 2021a, p. 8). Out of the two binaries, the ultimate result becomes “...Unlike the parties that lie to the Turkish people, the ZP is the sole and true representative of the Turkish Nation’s WILL TO EXIST” (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 52).

2.4. Discussion

Based on evidence from interview data, party documents and discourses, I claim that the ZP can be classified as a radical right party within the Turkish political context. It blends nationalism, populism, xenophobia, and nativism, with racial undertones. Although claimed otherwise by the party officials, this ideological setting makes the party anti-immigrant as classified in the political science literature. Its support for procedural democracy and advocacy for a return to parliamentary governance aligns with the radical right’s selective embrace of democratic principles, while its rejection of pluralism and multiculturalism reflects a broader illiberal worldview that radical right parties adopt. As Rydgren (2018) adds, the ideological core of the radical right parties is often combined with authoritarianism as well, which emerges in forms of strong emphasis on law and order, traditional values and social cohesion of the native population at the expense of multiculturalism and pluralism.

The ZP shows evidence of authoritarianism with high support for law and order⁵ and social cohesion at the expense of individual freedoms and pluralism— articulated with national unity crisis argument. One of the very rare references to authority is also that “Authority without freedom is tyranny, while freedom without authority is anarchy.

⁵ While the rule of law is often used within radical right (and more commonly far-right) studies as a measure to assess authoritarian tendencies, I incorporated a similar dimension into my interview questions by asking party officials: “If you had to choose between Turkey’s security and the rule of law, which would you prioritize?” This question echoed the widely circulated phrase, which is often attributed to Atatürk and frequently invoked in contemporary nationalist and security-oriented discourse “If the homeland is at stake, nothing else matters.” (“*Söz konusu vatansa, gerisi teferruattır.*”) All of the party officials I interviewed with answered this question attentively, expressing their respect for the rule of law and importance of its continuity no matter what.

We will establish the balance between freedom and authority in a way that serves the interests of the nation as a whole” (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 20). However, national interests remain undefined. The ZP also lacks emphasis on traditional values as well as authoritarian tendencies regarding intra-party relations within the radical right framework. Furthermore, although party leader Ümit Özdağ has emerged as the most prominent figure representing the party, many interviewees firmly emphasized that decision-making processes within the ZP are very democratic. This emphasis can be interpreted as a response to their past experiences with authoritarian leadership in the MHP, marking yet another point of departure from the MHP's political trajectory. Although the ZP also lacks the Christian framing common among European radical right parties, its secularism reflects local political dynamics. Departing from the mainstream nationalist trajectory set by the MHP, the ZP stands as the first prominent example of a European-style radical right party adapted to the Turkish political landscape.

In the following chapter, I will focus on a key dimension that emerges from the preceding discussion on party identity: the construction of ‘others’ (Hargreaves & Leaman, 1995; Rzepnikowska, 2019) and the development of an anti-immigrant stance by the ZP. Chapter 3 will examine how the party frames refugees relying on the interview data, party documents and data from social media. The discussion will connect to Chapters 1.1 (*What is Radical Right?*) and 2.3 (*The Current Trajectory: Identifying the ZP's Position*), thereby illustrating how the party's real-life practices align with the host ideologies, while also clarifying terminological distinctions regarding legal status of refugees. In doing so, the chapter will demonstrate that the ideological elements previously identified – such as nationalism, nativism, populism, xenophobia, racism – are embedded in the party's exclusionary rhetoric, situating it clearly within the radical right tradition.

CHAPTER 3

FRAMING THE ‘OTHER’: THE VICTORY PARTY ON REFUGEES AND MIGRATION

In framing migration as a political issue, anti-immigrant parties (AIPs) often draw on social grievances, in line with Foucault, Laclau, and Mouffe’s discourse-theoretical approach, which asserts that “every aspect of social life is governed by power and ... the political has full primacy over the social” (Buonfino, 2004). Within this framework, the politicization of migration entails the exercise of hegemony, the drawing of symbolic boundaries, and the construction of collective identities through exclusion, thus defining the ‘other’ by what it is not – a process known as social antagonism (Buonfino, 2004). Similarly, since its establishment in 2021, the ZP declared that the increasing number of individuals arriving in Turkey particularly since 2011 without legal status or clear regulations governing their stay is the root cause of the country’s deepening economic crisis, social and political tensions, cultural erosion, and security threats (Zafer Partisi, 2021; Interviewee 1, 18 April 2024; Interviewee 3, 22 November 2024; Interviewee 4, 25 November 2024; Interviewee 7, 26 November 2024).

The ZP broadly maintains that Turkey’s recovery from these multidimensional crises depends on the return of all refugees and irregular migrants, regardless of whether their entry into the country was legal or illegal. While the party considers deportation of those without legal status as a non-negotiable right of the state, it has also advocated for the repatriation of individuals who hold legal status (i.e. Syrians under Temporary Protection), which became an argument that has led to heated debates among political actors, legal experts, international organizations, and the public. The ZP contributes a distinctive voice to these debates, calling for Turkey to withdraw

from international agreements that oblige it to accept migrants, arguing that the regional conflicts no longer constitute immediate threats to life of refugees. This chapter elaborates on the ZP's anti-immigrant stance briefly outlined above, which has become its defining image and a key source of popular support. It will explore how the party frames refugees, conceptualizes immigration, and integrates these positions into its broader political agenda, on which there is an extensive material that deserves to be discussed in a separate chapter. The discussion will also clarify relevant terminological debates and link back to the theoretical framework introduced in the previous chapters.

3.1. National and International Legal Framework for Refugees

Turkey is a signatory state to the 1951 Geneva Convention, which was prepared under the United Nations (UN) as a cornerstone, together with the 1967 Protocol, for defining the legal framework on the status, rights and responsibilities of refugees as well as the international standards of treatment for their protection. Along with 148 other countries (UNHCR, 2024) Turkey is bound by the refugee definition provided by the Convention, although the broader scope of this framework varies for each country due to holding reservations to certain articles (UNHCR, n.d.). Within this variety lies the conditional nature of migrant and immigrant statuses⁶, which are defined by the national authorities of individual states. The lack of international consensus on these classifications results in vague or inconsistent definitions under international law, thereby limiting the legal status options available to people on the move in the countries they arrive in.

Due to its own reservations to the Convention, Turkey had to establish its own national legal framework for managing the status of Syrians, who began arriving in large numbers after 2011. Accordingly, in 2013, a committee consisting of academics, civil society organizations, NGOs and bureaucrats under the coordination of the

⁶ Migrant is a broader status covering “any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of (1) the person’s legal status; (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (3) what the causes for the movement are; or (4) what the length of the stay is (IOM, 2019)”. On the other hand, immigrant only refers to “...a person who moves into a country other than that of his or her nationality or usual residence, so that the country of destination effectively becomes his or her new country of usual residence (IOM, 2019, p. 103).”

Directorate General of Migration Management (*Göç İdaresi Genel Müdürlüğü*, now Presidency of Migration Management or PMM) operating under the Ministry of Interior) prepared the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (Law No. 6458) defining the Turkish standards of treatment and international protection for immigrants and asylum-seekers. Later, in 2016, the EU-Turkey Statement introduced a new dimension for migration management in Turkey, particularly regarding Syrians.

3.1.1. International Legal Framework

The 1951 Geneva Convention (or Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees) defines refugees as a person who,

“owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it (p. 14).”

The events that led to this document had started with the First World War and continued with the Second World War, as millions of people were forcibly displaced and sought refuge. Thus, initially this definition was limited to protecting European refugees following the Second World War, for the events occurring before 1 January 1951. However, the 1967 Protocol (Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees), the first and only amendment to the Convention, removed the geographic and time limitations in order to apply the treaty to broader populations (UNHCR, n.d.).

With the removal of geographic and time limitations, the Convention stipulates that principles must be applied without discrimination as to race, religion, country of origin, sex, age, disability, sexuality, or other prohibited grounds for discrimination (Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 1951, p. 3). Individuals who have been forcibly displaced and have applied for international protection are referred to as asylum-seekers until their claims are assessed and they are formally granted refugee status. Individuals who qualify for the refugee status under international law, based on

the provided definition, are entitled to international protection and fundamental principles such as non-discrimination, non-penalization and non-refoulement⁷. Exclusion from these principles apply to individuals who committed war crimes, crimes against humanity, serious non-political crimes, or who are guilty of acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations, or who is subjected to international protection under any of UN agencies other than UNHCR (Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 1951).

There is not any equivalent of both refugee and asylum-seekers in Turkish language, rather people are commonly referred to as “sığınmacılar” covering both statuses. Using ethnic denominators as a way of referral (*Suriyeliler* – Syrians, *Afganlar* – Afghans, *Iraklılar* – Iraqis, *İranlılar* – Iranians) has also been common in the Turkish political context. With the development of a more comprehensive national legal framework, the process became increasingly complex as for instance, Syrians gained a different status, which complicates consistency in terminology and classification.

3.1.2. National Legal Framework

Although international law provides a general framework for refugee status, Turkey maintains a geographical reservation to the 1951 Geneva Convention, limiting eligibility for refugee status to individuals originating from European countries (Law on Foreigners and International Protection, 2013). As a broader category, the immigrant status (*göçmen*) defined by the Settlement Law No. 5543 (2006) is limited to people with Turkish descent by stating “Foreigners who are not of Turkish descent and not attached to Turkish culture, as well as those who are of Turkish descent and attached to Turkish culture but have been deported or deemed unsuitable to enter Turkey for security reasons, shall not be accepted as immigrants” (Article 4).

As a result of the reservation and Law No. 5543 (2006), the legal status of Syrians who began arriving in Turkey in 2011 became a matter of debate, leading to public

⁷ Regarding the non-refoulement principle, it is claimed with the Geneva Convention (1951) that “Importantly, the Convention contains various safeguards against the expulsion of refugees. The principle of non-refoulement is so fundamental that no reservations or derogations may be made to it. It provides that no one shall expel or return (“refouler”) a refugee against his or her will, in any manner whatsoever, to a territory where he or she fears threats to life or freedom” (Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 1951, p. 3).

concern and political controversy. To address this legal gap, Turkey enacted Law No. 6458 on Foreigners and International Protection in 2013 under PMM's supervision, which designated Syrians as "people under Temporary Protection". Accordingly, "Temporary protection may be provided to foreigners who have been forced to leave their country, are unable to return, and have arrived at or crossed our borders in large numbers in search of urgent and temporary protection (Law on Foreigners and International Protection, 2013)." and since then Syrians are subjected to this law. As a demonstration of its control over the issue, the PMM website features detailed statistics on forcibly displaced persons residing in Turkey, aiming to foster transparency and build public trust in response to growing concerns. However, this new designation did little to alleviate public discomfort, as it implied the potential for prolonged stays amid a continuously growing number of arrivals. In addition to Syrians, the recent influx also included Afghans, Iraqis, and Iranians in the following years, whose legal status was even more ambiguous. These individuals neither originate from Europe nor fall under the provisions of other international agreements that would define their status in Turkey. The complexity is furthered by the presence of many individuals who cross the border without registering through official channels, thereby remaining outside of legal and administrative frameworks.

Triggering all the public debates and discomfort, Turkish authorities signed another agreement for controlling mass migration from Syria to the West. Following the Joint Action Plan in 2015, the EU-Turkey relations were revived with the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement. Under the agreement, Turkey committed to host Syrians permanently and prevent transits to Europe through stricter border control, readmitting asylum seekers from Europe, and improving refugees' access to work and education. In return, the EU pledged €3 billion in aid, visa liberalization for Turkish citizens, and the revival of Turkey's EU accession talks – promises that have largely gone hitherto unfulfilled (Aljazeera, 2016; Cendrowicz, 2016). To this day, the statement was criticized by many, arguing that Turkey did not qualify as a 'safe country' for refugees (Hewitt, 2016; Malik, 2015; Polychroniou, 2015). Criticisms increased as implementing the agreement proved highly challenging, primarily due to practical limitations and, in some cases, impossibilities stemming from both internal contradictions within the deal itself and the rising authoritarian tendencies in Turkey. Overall, the national legal

framework remains inadequate, as it falls short of addressing the needs of Syrians while also failing to meet the expectations of the Turkish public.

Although conceptual and terminological definitions discussed above are largely agreed upon through legal documents, the statistics provided by the PMM regarding Syrians, as well as regular and irregular migrants, are received with skepticism by the ZP. Since its establishment, the party consistently emphasized the perceived unreliability of both national and international institutions in managing recent migration flows, particularly those involving Syrians, due to a lack of transparency. Claiming to offer a more accurate portrayal of the situation, the party positions itself as a credible source of data and information on the backgrounds of migrants. For example, as of December 2024, the ZP declared that the total number of refugees, fugitives, and immigrants in Turkey had reached 13 million (Interviewee 2, 22 November 2024; Interviewee 3, 22 November 2024), whereas official figures reported by PMM stand at approximately 3.1 million (Presidency of Migration Management, 2024). Currently, the party still claims the numbers are around 13-14 million (Interviewee 3, 22 November 2024), while PMM data puts the figure less than 3 million (Presidency of Migration Management, 2025). This distrust extends beyond data to policymaking, with both national and international authorities accused of pursuing political agendas that prioritize strategic interests over the effective management of migration. In response, the ZP proposes its own comprehensive immigration framework, one that is firmly grounded in an anti-immigrant stance.

3.1.3. The ZP Terminology

International and national legal frameworks offer political actors a clear terminological roadmap. The ZP – demonstrating a strong command of both – draws primarily on the vocabulary codified in Law No. 6458 on Foreigners and International Protection (2013). Although the party has recently begun challenging the Presidency of Migration Management by questioning its migration data, it still praises the statute itself. The party's appreciation of the law is expressed by Interviewee 7 as "One must truly commend those who drafted this law (25 November 2024)." Accordingly, party officials frequently refer to Syrians either simply as "Syrians" (*Suriyeliler*), "Syrians

under Temporary Protection” (*Geçici Koruma Altındaki Suriyeliler*), or, as expressed in the interviews, as “temporary refugees” (*geçici sığınmacılar*)⁸ (Interviewee 2, 22 November 2024; Interviewee 7, 26 November 2024). Afghans, on the other hand, are either directly labeled as “Afghans” (*Afganlar*) or included within the broader category of “fugitives” (*kaçaklar*), a term used to describe individuals from various national backgrounds who are perceived to have entered the country illegally. In this context, the term *sığınmacı* (“refugee” or “asylum-seeker”) operates as an umbrella label encompassing all such groups, regardless of their legal status or country of origin. Labeling migrants as legally temporary signals both an expectation of short-term residence or, under current conditions, the presumption of eventual return. By adopting legal language that emphasizes the interests of the Turkish nation, the party can legitimize its own policy proposals.

By contrast, the international framework is portrayed as a threat – especially in light of the EU–Turkey Statement, which aims to keep refugees in Turkey. Discourses about an “imperialist plan” (see Chapter 3.2) reveal the party’s deep mistrust of external actors, including the EU. Interviewee 2 articulated this sentiment in civilizational terms: “Despite belonging to the same religion, the hostility historically observed between Catholics and Protestants is unparalleled in most other faiths. By contrast, Islam is fundamentally a religion of tolerance.” (22 November 2024). European radical-right actors deploy a similar argument in reverse, invoking cultural differences – secularized Christian heritage versus an allegedly inherent Islamic fundamentalism – to stigmatize Muslim immigrants (Brubaker, 2017).

3.2. The ZP “Framework”

Due to its exclusionary rhetoric, the ZP has been widely criticized for allegedly violating legal norms, inciting racism and fascism, promoting hostility and hatred toward immigrants, and embracing an overtly anti-immigrant stance. At the same time, however, it has garnered growing public support as Syrian migration has become a more salient issue in Turkish politics. In an effort to avoid further backlash, the party strategically adheres to terminology established by national and international

⁸ Although “*geçici sığınmacı*” is not the accurate legal term, it serves as a shortened version of the official status. Given that the phrase “Syrians under Temporary Protection” is relatively long and technical, party officials resort to this abbreviated form for convenience in everyday discourse.

legal frameworks, as outlined above. According to Mudde (2012), anti-immigrant attitudes emerge when immigrants are seen as a threat on cultural, economic, security and political well-being of the host nation. The relevant literature presents a consistent analysis but offers additional frames as well. For the purposes of this dissertation, Mudde (2012)'s analysis and Balta et al. (2022)'s work, which conclude that the anti-immigrant discourses often revolve around these four frames, will be utilized.

The ZP discourse is consistently structured around economic, political, cultural, and security frames, all of which are articulated consistently with the host ideologies (See Chapter 1.1.). While some statements can be clearly categorized under a specific frame, they frequently intersect with the other three, as the party consistently presents immigration as the root cause of all major problems. Gender is also frequently invoked, especially through narratives that construct the figure of the single young male immigrant as a particular threat to women in Turkey. While gender could be treated as a separate, fifth frame, in the following discussion I will include it under the security frame. So, the chapter will analyze the party's construction of security threats on two levels: the individual level, with a focus on citizens' everyday sense of safety, and the state level, involving national sovereignty and demographic stability.

3.2.1. Economic Frame

The economic frame portrays immigrants as a burden on the national economy, accusing them of exploiting social benefits and job opportunities (Balta et al., 2022; Betz, 1994). Looking from the perspective of welfare chauvinism, this frame often advances the idea that welfare services should be reserved for the native population. This logic also aligns with economic nativism, which maintains that only members of the native group should inhabit the state and enjoy its resources. As Betz (2019) argues, xenophobic attitudes are frequently articulated through these concepts, promoting the exclusion of immigrants from socioeconomic entitlements.

In the case of the ZP, the economic frame is the most prominent among its other discursive strategies, typically serving as a starting point in any discussion of immigration. Party documents and social media content contain a wide array of claims about the financial burdens posed by the long-term presence of refugees and the alleged privileges afforded to them by their legal status. Broadly, the party

attributes Turkey's worsening economic crisis to the refugees, citing billions of dollars spent annually on their upkeep, monthly allowances, and tax-exempt work permits (Zafer Partisi, 2021; Interviewee 5, 25 November 2024). This rhetoric centered around economic grievances directly reinforces the 'us vs. them' logic consistent with the populist discourse. In line with the four crises identified in the party manifesto (see Chapter 2.3), the economic frame becomes a primary tool for attacking the government's migration policies.

A central criticism concerns the financial discrepancy between the resources Turkey allocates for refugee support and the aid received under the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement. The party argues that the European Union's contributions fall far short of covering Turkey's annual expenses, while the Turkish government failed to manage these resources transparently. As Interviewee 3 notes: "The Republic of Turkey allocates approximately 11 billion dollars each year to this foreign population. This causes additional financial burden leading to unemployment and deeper economic problems within Turkey (22 November 2024)." Interviewee 1 notes that total spending has reached 200 billion dollars by 2024 (18 April 2024). The party rhetoric includes analogies such as "Can a swimmer with 10 kilograms tied to each foot swim?" or "Can a car move with its handbrake pulled?" (Interviewee 6, 25 November 2024) to dramatize the impact and create an image of vulnerability, shifting the attention from refugees to the host nation.

Amid worsening economic conditions, the ZP presents immigration – specifically the presence of millions of refugees – as the root cause of Turkey's economic turmoil. The crisis, according to the party, is intensified by the unequal access to jobs, education, and healthcare between Turkish citizens and refugees (Ümit Özdağ, 2022). This narrative is reinforced by multiple statements from the party manifesto, such as "The ZP defends the right of the Turkish textile worker in Istanbul who lost his/her job to a Syrian, along with their spouse and child's right to feed themselves" (Zafer Partisi, 2021a, p. 11). This portrayal establishes a direct causal link between immigration and the economic hardship of ordinary Turkish citizens, framing refugees as responsible for job loss and domestic precarity. The emphasis on the family unit reinforces the emotional weight of the claim, appealing to broader notions of vulnerability and social justice. Second, it is stated that "The Victory Party stands

for the rights of Aunt Ayşe, who has to collect trash from the market because food prices have risen due to the arrival of 8 million people in Turkey” (Zafer Partisi, 2021, p. 11). By invoking the symbolic figure of “Aunt Ayşe”, the party personalizes economic grievances and makes its narrative relatable to the general public. The image of her collecting discarded food dramatizes the consequences of inflation, which are attributed directly to the refugee presence. Another claim is “The Victory Party is the party of Turkish citizens in Istanbul, Konya, Mersin, and Gaziantep, who are struggling to make ends meet due to rising rents caused by the presence of Syrians” (Zafer Partisi, 2021, p. 11), which expands the scope of economic victimhood geographically, suggesting that the crisis affects the entire nation and not just metropolitan centers. The party uses housing pressures to further reinforce a competitive, zero-sum framing of resource distribution. Lastly, “The Victory Party defends the rights of Turkish tailors in Gaziantep who lost their customers to Syrian tailors and had to shut down their shops” (Zafer Partisi, 2021a, p. 11), appears as a statement reinforcing the theme of unfair economic competition by framing Syrian entrepreneurs as the reason for native businesses collapsing. The language of “loss” and “shutdown” underscores a sense of dispossession and crisis.

The party criticizes the unfair competition created by refugees who offer cheap labor and run businesses under more favorable tax conditions. This criticism is fueled by nativist and welfare chauvinist sentiments, which suggest that Turkish citizens, as taxpaying contributors to the economy, should be prioritized. Moreover, the party highlights how Syrian-owned businesses trigger social division by enabling refugee communities to remain economically self-contained, encouraging ghettoization and social isolation. This concern is captured in the following statement:

“Syrians do not shop from Turks, even if it is cheaper. Moreover, while Turkish shopkeepers pay taxes and make social security contributions even during pandemics, Syrians who do not pay taxes or social security take over the businesses of bankrupt Turkish shopkeepers” (Zafer Partisi, 2021a, p. 10).

To appeal to younger voters and nationalist supporters, the party also raises concerns about access to higher education. It criticizes the allocation of university seats to refugees, some of whom it accuses of extremist affiliations such as being an ISIS member, while qualified Turkish students are denied admission due to limited quotas.

In return, the party promises to end this although such statement target Syrians directly and create hostility driven by economic concerns and xenophobic sentiments.

In this context, the party presents forced repatriation back to countries of origin as the only viable solution. It claims that the return of refugees will decrease rental prices, lower the cost of staple goods, and increase purchasing power. A metaphor from the party manifesto reinforces this view: “In summary, with the return of refugees to their countries, Turkey will surge forward like a horse freed from its chains; it will fill its lungs with clean oxygen like a person who finally breathes after being held underwater for too long” (Zafer Partisi, 2021a, p. 15). Summing up the party’s economic narrative, Interviewee 3 explains:

“One of the main factors disrupting this harmony [between Syrians and the native population] is the fact that the Republic of Turkey, along with the current government and the main opposition, has granted temporary refugees certain rights, powers, and privileges that they do not extend to their own citizens – to the Turks – which creates an additional problem. These can be described primarily as economic privileges, social privileges, social security privileges, and educational privileges” (22 November 2024).

Taken together, the ZP’s economic framing transforms immigration into a zero-sum equation in which the prosperity of Turkish citizens is seen as directly undermined by the presence of refugees. This strategy not only reinforces populist, nativist and xenophobic antagonisms but also helps justify exclusionary policies under the guise of economic necessity and social justice.

3.2.2. Political Frame

Within the political frame, immigrants are depicted as actors aligned with domestic elites who prioritize the demands of “outsiders” over those of the native population (Balta et al., 2022; Mudde, 2007). This framing operates on two levels. First, it portrays elites as detached from the will of the native majority, consistent with the us vs. them logic that typifies populist discourse. Second, immigrants are cast in an antagonistic role that intensifies nativist sentiments and supports the idea that the native population should be prioritized. These two claims work in tandem to reproduce the populist binary, ultimately enabling radical right parties to trigger

xenophobic sentiments by presenting immigration as part of an existential threat to the host nation.

In the case of the ZP, “elites” typically refer to the ruling AKP government and a corrupt bureaucracy held responsible for implementing the open-door policy that allowed millions of immigrants to enter Turkey. While the party generally avoids labeling immigrants as conscious collaborators with these elites, it still presents a framework in which immigrants are instrumentalized by hostile powers. Specifically, the party accuses the domestic elites of working with imperialist actors who use immigration as a tool of destabilization. In this configuration, the “outsider” is twofold: first, the imperialist powers allegedly seeking to destroy Turkey, and second, the immigrants themselves, who, despite being victims of displacement, are perceived to have gained superior access to social benefits. Yet, over time, immigrants are portrayed as criminals who exploit their perceived privileges, thereby reversing the roles of victim and perpetrator and shifting the sense of victimhood onto the native population (Betz, 1994).

This dual framing aligns with both inclusionary and exclusionary populism as discussed in Chapter 1.1. The former targets the elite as betrayers of the people, while the latter frames immigrants as culturally incompatible outsiders. Consistent with this narrative, the ZP claims in its manifesto that the AKP government is complicit with Western imperialists in facilitating a long-term plan to establish an independent Kurdistan in southern Turkey and northern Syria (Zafer Partisi, 2021a). This project is referred to as Strategic Migration Engineering (*Stratejik Göç Mühendisliği*), which is also the title of a book authored by party leader Ümit Özdağ (2023). The party states:

“There is an attempt to undermine the foundations of the Turkish Nation’s sovereignty in Anatolia, discredit our country, and ultimately drag it into a civil war like that experienced in Yugoslavia, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Turkish cities and districts are being covertly and gradually invaded. In military academies of imperialist powers, the directed migration movements toward our country are referred to as political warfare” (Zafer Partisi, 2021a, p. 6).

This statement aims to construct a sense of national emergency, reinforcing the perception of immigration as part of an imperialist plot that poses a direct threat to

Turkish sovereignty. Interviewee 1 explains the situation as “The country is being turned into an international migrant camp so that Europe and Israel can sleep peacefully. In other words, the structure of the nation-state and the national state is being dismantled” (18 April 2024). The party extends this argument in another excerpt from the same source:

“The covert invasion of our country is being facilitated by Erdoğan, who is allegedly implementing a secret program to ensure that Syrians remain in Turkey. Within Erdoğan’s inner circle, both Kurdish nationalist elements and Arab supremacist cadres are reportedly working toward the continued settlement of Syrians in the country” (Zafer Partisi, 2021a, p. 7).

This rhetoric reinforces the party’s narrative of betrayal by domestic elites and positions the ZP as the sole defender of the Turkish Nation. By identifying Kurdish nationalists and Arab supremacists as “enemies of the Turk”, the party invokes ethnonationalist and even racist undertones, suggesting that ethnic identity alone can serve as grounds for disloyalty or subversion.

The threat perception embedded within the political frame is further articulated through demographic anxieties. Changing demographics is seen as a strategy utilized by the imperialists and the current government, to disrupt national unity. According to the ZP, Turkey’s population structure is under siege due to the increasing number of refugees – claimed to have reached 13 million by 2024 – many of whom, they argue, are traumatized, culturally incompatible, and unwilling to integrate (Ümit Özdağ, 2022). The party warns that this trend will erode the Turkish majority within 25 years, ultimately threatening the continuity of Turkish national identity as part of the imperialist plot (Özdağ, 2020). Ümit Özdağ repeatedly refers to this as a “demographic earthquake” (X entries on 10 January 2024, 16 January 2024, and 17 February 2024), deliberately invoking the imagery of crisis by drawing on public fears associated with the devastating earthquake that struck Turkey on 6 February 2023. This discourse also reflects majoritarian ethnonationalism by suggesting that demographic change – caused by a rising refugee population – threatens to reduce the Turkish majority and lead to national collapse (see Chapter 1.1).

To counteract this perceived threat, party officials have repeatedly invoked nationalist slogans. For example, Özdağ stated at a public gathering:

“The Victory Party is the only representative of the struggle against imperial projects aiming to establish Big Kurdistan and the only party that will give Turkey back to Turks through sending refugees back” (Ümit Özdağ, 2023). During other public appearances, particularly in refugee-dense neighborhoods, Özdağ and other party members have echoed similar claims, emphasizing demographic change as a political threat (Ümit Özdağ, 2022; Ümit Özdağ, 2022).

3.2.3. Cultural Frame

From a cultural perspective, immigrants are portrayed as an outgroup – foreign elements that undermine and threaten native values by introducing non-native ideas and lifestyles (Balta et al., 2022; Wodak, 2015). These values encompass cultural practices, traditions, language, and the secular lifestyle of the native population, all of which are perceived as being at risk. Within this cultural framing, discourses often draw on nativist themes, asserting that states should be inhabited solely by the native group to preserve sociocultural homogeneity. While nationalism is clearly embedded in these views, the construction of exclusionary discourse based on sociocultural differences – which often intersects with security concerns due to its association with criminality – can carry racist undertones. This occurs when political actors glorify specific sociocultural habits of the native population while indirectly disparaging those of foreigners, particularly when such habits are seen as inherent to ethnic identity. In European radical right discourse, cultural framing has also been used to reject Muslim immigrants on the grounds of ‘incompatibility’ with Western values which define the Western civilization (Mudde, 2007; Brubaker, 2017). The ZP echoes this framing by portraying Syrians and Afghans as culturally irreconcilable with Turkish norms.

In line with this, the ZP consistently portrays refugees as culturally incompatible, particularly due to their Arab identity, which manifests in distinct traditions and daily behaviors. Sociocultural differences cited include living in overcrowded households – thus lacking privacy and boundaries (Interviewee 5, 25 November 2024) – neglecting public hygiene by, for example, leaving trash on the streets (Interviewee 4, 25 November 2024), and exhibiting a higher tendency to commit crimes, which allegedly renders integration impossible (Interviewee 3, 22 November 2024). Language becomes another prominent marker of incompatibility, triggering ethnic nationalist

sentiments, especially when refugees show indifference to learning Turkish (Interviewee 3, 22 November 2024; Interviewee 5, 25 November 2024). In this view, failure to integrate is seen as inevitably posing a security threat to the native population (Interviewee 3, 22 November 2024) based on the risk of invasion.

Furthermore, the ZP identifies particularly Syrian and Afghan refugees as threats to Turkey's secular way of life, citing their conservative lifestyles rooted in Muslim-Arabic identity. The party argues that Turkish citizens, especially women, once felt free to wear shorts and skirts or stay out late at night – until, according to them, such freedoms were threatened by refugee harassment. The party manifesto appeals to these everyday concerns, as seen in statements like: “Ali Bey from Önder neighborhood, you will be able to walk in the parks and streets of the neighborhood you’ve lived in for 30 years, peacefully” (Zafer Partisi, 2021a, p. 13). Although the party frames these issues as affecting the broader population, Turkish women become the central figures in the cultural frame's intersection with secular lifestyle concerns. The party claims: “The Victory Party protects the rights of women who cannot walk safely in their homeland because of harassers saying ‘This is heaven, angels are here’” (Zafer Partisi, 2021a, p. 12). Such statements not only criminalize refugees and securitize migration but also portray women as vulnerable figures needing protection, reinforcing narratives associated with the security frame (see Chapter 3.2.4). This reinforces the image of refugees as inherently dangerous, while simultaneously glorifying Turkish identity as a resilient host community that, despite its generosity (“*Türk milleti misafirperverdir*”), must now endure yet another challenge.

This antagonism may reflect hierarchical sentiments, particularly in the context of the ZP. In the conducted interviews, refugees and irregular migrants were frequently referred to as “*bunlar*” (these people) – a term used by nearly all interviewees and one that implies an inherent sense of inferiority. Overall, the party's cultural framing emphasizes inherent, unbridgeable differences between Turks and refugees, as captured in the statement: “Looking at the 13 years that have passed, we observe that this group has not been able to socially and sociologically integrate with Turkey; instead, they have formed ghettos in the outskirts of cities and organized themselves among their own communities” (Interviewee 3, 22 November 2024). As this

discussion shows, the cultural and security frames are closely intertwined, with many examples overlapping between the two.

3.2.4. Security Frame

The security frame focuses on criminal activities and terrorism allegedly committed by immigrants and stems from the broader securitization of migration (Balta et al., 2022; Huysmans, 2006; Ibrahim, 2005). Securitization is used as a tool to heighten fear among the native population, reinforcing xenophobic and nativist sentiments by portraying immigration as a threat to national and individual security. Consistent with the logic of xenophobia, authorities construct images of “the other” based on fear and hostility (Rzepnikowska, 2019), framing immigrants as threats both to individuals and to the nation – often rooted in cultural difference.

The ZP frequently employs the security frame, referring to refugees as “future bombs,” “ISIS collaborators,” “warmakers,” and “criminals,” and describing mass migration as a major vulnerability for Turkey (Zafer Partisi, 2021a; 2021b; Ümit Özdağ, 2022). As Interviewee 3 stated: “Population movements of this magnitude lead to a change in political structures or more explicitly, the collapse of targeted states. History offers examples from the fall of the Western Roman Empire to more recent cases like the four waves of Afghan-Pakistan migration. The destabilization of Lebanon is largely attributed to the influence of Palestinian groups” (22 November 2024). Using real-life examples, Interviewee 3 intensifies the threat perception and fear environment.

As the party’s leading figure, Özdağ frequently labels unregistered entrants as “fugitives,” “security threats”, or “bombs that explode in our cities”, asserting that their presence will spark a civil war (Ümit Özdağ, 2022). He frames these developments as part of a broader geopolitical strategy – what he calls “Strategic Migration Engineering” – allegedly designed to facilitate the formation of an independent Kurdistan in Northern Syria and Southern Turkey (Özdağ, 2020; Ümit Özdağ, 2022). The party even claims, “They didn’t come because they were bombed; they were bombed so that they would come” (Özdağ, 2020). In line with this conspiratorial thinking, Özdağ suggests that Southern Turkey, particularly Hatay, has become a hub for foreign intelligence activity, stating: “Hatay is the city in Turkey

with the highest number of foreign service agents. Even European countries have spies operating there” (Ümit Özdağ, 2022). According to this narrative, the current government collaborates with imperialist actors to implement this strategy. Further, Interviewee 2 describes some refugees as “militia forces trained by the United States against the Taliban” (22 November 2024), which was claimed by Interviewee 1 (18 April 2024) as well, intensifying the atmosphere of fear.

The party attributes a number of terror attacks, such as the 2015 Ankara train station bombing, to refugee presence, with Özdağ stating: “All these people are the cause of death for Turkish people” (Ümit Özdağ, 2022) contributing to the increase in perception of threat. Concerns about refugees acting as drug couriers, which eases access to drugs by younger populations (Zafer Partisi, 2021a; 2021b; Interviewee 5, 25 November 2024) and fears of becoming a minority by 2050 due to the increasing birth rates of refugees as opposed to Turkish citizens (Zafer Partisi, 2021b) further amplify xenophobic sentiments by creating fear for the future. This fear is articulated with a threat perception against younger generations, who are at the core of nationalist ideology ensuring the survival of the nation. Consequently, the party promises: “[To Turkish people] You will not feel alienated and alone in buses, trams, or subways” (Zafer Partisi, 2021a, p. 13), and “There will be no Syrian or Afghan groups in our streets who poisoned our kids” (Zafer Partisi, 2021a, p. 14). These promises frame the ZP as the ultimate savior of the Turkish nation, reinforcing the populist narrative.

At the individual level, the security frame is heavily gendered, leveraging gender to heighten perceived threats – especially to women. Gender is defined as “a basis for social hierarchy and inequality between men and women” (Ridgeway, 2015, p. 189), embedded in social practices that organize roles and relationships (Ridgeway, 2011). In populist patriarchal contexts, gender becomes a political tool used to reinforce traditional roles and power structures (Walby, 2009). Nationalist ideologies often reduce gender to family policy, emphasizing women's roles as mothers and bearers of future generations (Walby, 2020). Moreover, women are portrayed as “somebody’s someone” who must be protected, reinforcing male authority (Gülel, 2020).

The ZP applies a gendered lens to its refugee discourse, associating refugees with threats to the sanctity of the family and nation. For example, the Chairmanship

Council includes a Vice Chairperson for Women, Children, and Family Policies. Reflecting nationalist sentiments, the party states, “Family is the foundation of society. The strength of national community depends on the strength of family” (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 157). This emphasis situates women within traditional roles and reduces gender issues to family matters.

Again, aligned with nationalist discourse, women are described as “our women,” a phrase that, while seemingly supportive, implies ownership and reinforces the need for male protection. Refugees – especially single males – are portrayed as threats to Turkish women, reinforcing the narrative of sexual danger. According to the party, refugees have harassed women, saying “This is heaven, angels are here” (Zafer Partisi, 2021a, p. 12), and thus, it defends the rights of women who are too afraid to walk alone in public spaces (Zafer Partisi, 2021a). This theme is reinforced in a short film titled “The Victory Party is the ultimate assurance for Turkish women” (Ümit Özdağ, 2023), in which a male refugee who becomes a HÜDA-PAR deputy is depicted as a harasser and murderer aiming to impose sharia law and suppress women’s rights.

One may question why this dissertation addresses gender within the rubric of the security frame rather than proposing a separate, fifth category – a gender frame – when classifying party discourse. While gender is undoubtedly relevant and important, the establishment of a distinct frame would be more appropriate for a party with a broader and more systematic discourse on gender-related issues. In the European context, for instance, radical right parties often articulate gender policies that extend beyond women to include LGBTQI+ communities. Their engagement with gender is typically twofold. On the one hand, they advance either progressive or conservative positions on LGBTQI+ rights, while simultaneously depicting native women as the symbolic bearers of the nation. On the other hand, gender becomes embedded in their civilizational rhetoric, serving as a marker that distinguishes “Christian Europe” from the “Muslim immigrant other,” particularly through contrasting gender roles. In this narrative, European actors condemn what they perceive as the subordination of women in Muslim cultures, framing it as incompatible with European civilization. Such rhetoric reinforces anti-immigrant discourse and broadens the appeal of radical right politics. By contrast, the ZP does

not engage with gender in a comparable manner, leaving little room for developing a distinct gender frame in the Turkish context.

Regarding ZP's approach, although the party is far from endorsing far-right positions that confine women to the domestic sphere, it also does not advocate progressive gender policies addressing groups other than women as well. The party program claims: "A strong society is one in which women are empowered and take their place in all areas of life" (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 175). Thus, the party's emphasis on gender is limited to women, and it is twofold: first, as subjects of refugee-related security threats; second, as essential members of Turkish society, both within families and the public sphere. These seemingly contradictory positions do not have a civilizational undertone, and they suggest that the party's direction on gender politics will only become clear if and when it gains greater influence over policymaking. For now, despite its secularism and occasional rhetoric of gender inclusion, the ZP remains a nationalist, radical right party lacking a progressive gender agenda. Its portrayal of women primarily as victims of refugee threats is more consistent with its overarching anti-immigrant platform.

3.3. Discussion

Building on this four-fold framework, the party addresses refugees directly, asserting that its position on immigration does not stem from hostility toward the refugee population, but rather from concerns over the survival of the Turkish state (Zafer Partisi, 2021a). In the party manifesto, this is expressed through the statement: "Now, as friends of the Turkish people, return to your homes" (Zafer Partisi, 2021a, p. 15), which calls on refugees to take responsibility while invoking a rhetoric of friendship to deny any antagonism. Nevertheless, the party proposes a repatriation program, declaring, "The Victory Party will build the Anatolian Fortress (referring to the *Anadolu Kalesi Projesi*) to protect our borders and send the refugees back" (Zafer Partisi, 2021a, p. 15). The Anatolian Fortress Project prioritizes the return – whether voluntary or enforced – of all refugees and seeks to prevent future migratory movements. As a continuum of the frequent war analogies in the party rhetoric, the title of the project – Fortress – strengthens perception of a war-like environment in which the party assumes the role of defender (Erçetin & Erdoğan, 2023). In the

execution of this project, Interviewee 3 noted that it is essential to cooperate with the parties to the Astana Platform (22 November 2024).

Although forced return contradicts the non-refoulement principle (see Footnote 7, p. 35) as stipulated by the Geneva Convention, the party insists that its plan respects both international and national legal frameworks, along with fundamental human rights. A comprehensive strategic action plan is presented under the Anatolian Fortress, along with a book written on the project (Bayır & Özdağ, 2024), which aims to ensure coordination between the Turkish government, the governments of refugees' countries of origin, and relevant international organizations. As the party program was prepared in 2021, the plan specifically emphasizes the return of Syrians under Temporary Protection through a structured program involving key state institutions – including the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, Ministry of National Defense, municipalities, and the National Intelligence Organization – to guarantee a legal and safe process of return. Although the project claims to align with international legal norms, it ultimately exemplifies the ZP's anti-immigrant stance under the guise of legal compliance.

In sum, the ZP's anti-immigrant stance is constructed not only through emotive and exclusionary discourse, but also through deliberate contestation of legal frameworks and demographic data, thereby positioning the party as a defender of the Turkish state and nation against what it perceives as an existential threat. By challenging the national and international legal mechanisms that define refugee and migrant status, and by offering its own counter-narratives and statistics, the party attempts to establish itself as the sole credible authority on the migration issue. This strategy plays a pivotal role in shaping its political identity and cultivating public support. However, it also entails the risk of constructing a single-issue party image, which, in the long run, may lead to a decline in public support if the salience of the issue diminishes or migration becomes less politically relevant. The anti-immigrant discourse does not operate in isolation; it serves as a cornerstone of the ZP's broader political project, which integrates nativist, nationalist, and populist ideologies. The following chapter will examine this broader agenda, demonstrating how the anti-immigrant rhetoric is embedded within a larger vision for the future of the Turkish nation-state.

CHAPTER 4

BEYOND MIGRATION: THE BROADER POLITICAL AGENDA OF THE VICTORY PARTY

Although the ZP has gained electoral support due to its immigration policies, it aims to distance itself from the image of being a single-issue party and emphasizes a broader political agenda that addresses Turkey's overarching problems. Consistent with the four crises identified by the party (see Chapter 2.3), the party program presents a comprehensive set of policies through which the current government is blamed for causing them as problems in the first place. This chapter explains and summarizes the projects introduced through the social media accounts of Ümit Özdağ and Zafer Partisi, as well as those outlined in the official party program. The ZP's political agenda encompasses a wide range of policy areas, which I organize into three main sections: Restructuring the State, Social Policy, and Security and Foreign Policy. This categorization facilitates a systematic examination of the party's broader program beyond its anti-immigrant agenda.

While the main purpose is to introduce the party's wider political agenda, the chapter also builds meaningful parallels between these policy proposals and their underlying ideological frameworks, linking them back to Chapter 2.3. A recurring theme suggests that most policies and projects refer to the immigration issue, reinforcing the argument that immigration is framed as the root cause of Turkey's current economic, social, and political crises. This supports an earlier claim that the party's identity is closely tied to its anti-immigrant stance – one it cannot afford to lose without risking a decline in public support. Another discernible pattern suggests that these policies aim to safeguard the well-being of the Turkish nation and ensure the survival of the Turkish state, underlining nationalism in the party identity, thereby reinforcing the

nationalist foundations of the party's identity. Overall, the policy agenda outlines what the party intends to achieve but remains limited in operational detail – except for the *Anadolu Kalesi Projesi* (see Chapter 3) and the broader security and foreign policy agenda – and falls short in specifying how these objectives will be implemented.

4.1. Restructuring the State

The party's proposed reforms begin with the restructuring of the state. According to the party, Turkey not only drifted away from its founding values but also experienced structural disintegration, particularly through the abolition of the legal entities of ministries that once formed the backbone of the central administrative organization. The current governmental system, in their view, contradicts Montesquieu's principle of separation of powers and is emblematic of democratic backsliding, marked by media censorship, opaque political processes, and executive deadlock due to cohabitation⁹ (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 42-43). To address these issues, the ZP proposes a new constitution that guarantees fundamental rights and freedoms, ensures coordination between central and local governments, reinforces the separation of powers, and establishes a more inclusive political party law. Additionally, a functional, merit-based, and technologically modern bureaucracy is emphasized, within the broader goal of returning back to parliamentary democracy (see Chapter 2.3) (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 45).

Aligned with this constitutional reform is the party's judicial policy, which aims to promote an independent judiciary. The ultimate goal is to ensure that justice is administered swiftly, impartially, and free from political or ideological interference

⁹ Cohabitation refers to “a premier- presidential system (semi-presidential system) in which the premier (prime minister) and president come from opposite partisan blocs. Either divided control or cohabitation raises the potential for conflicts in the form of competing democratic legitimacies...” typically resulting from opposing majorities in the executive and legislative branches (Shugart & Carey, 1992, p. 272). This power-sharing arrangement can lead to institutional friction and policy gridlock, particularly when the president's and the prime minister's political agendas diverge. In the Turkish context, the ZP uses the term cohabitation to describe a dysfunction specific to the post-2017 presidential system. According to the party, one of the major flaws of the “palace regime” introduced by the Presidential Government System is the potential for political deadlock when the president and the parliamentary majority belong to different political parties. In such a case, the party argues, the system risks becoming entirely gridlocked and ungovernable (Zafer Partisi, 2021, p. 42). This concern reflects a broader critique of institutional design and democratic erosion under the current administration, reinforcing the ZP's call for a new constitution and a return to a parliamentary system with stronger separation of powers.

(Zafer Partisi, 2021, p. 45). Several proposed reforms relate to institutions such as the Supreme Council of Judges and Prosecutors, the Constitutional Court, and other high courts, all of which aim to support the integrity and autonomy of the judiciary. Within this broader plan of restructuring the state, the party offers a project *Türk Devletini Türk Milletine Geri Vereceğiz Projesi* (We Will Give Turkish State Back to Turkish Nation Project) seeking to restore justice, merit-based opportunities, and secular state order through eliminating cults and religious communities sneaked in public institutions (Ümit Özdağ, 2023). Overall, how these promises will be operationalized remains obscure.

4.2. Social Policies

The party program addresses a wide range of policy areas, that range in detail as well. For analytical clarity, I group the majority of the ZP's political agenda under the heading of social policy, encompassing issues such as education, economy, aerospace, healthcare, transportation, culture, and art. This categorization not only provides a more coherent structure for the chapter but also offers a comprehensive view of how the party envisions the societal dimensions of governance, in connection with the radical right framework.

4.2.1. Economy

Among the most detailed proposals of the ZP is the sustainable economy project, which seeks to improve trade conditions and enhance Turkey's competitiveness through a production-based free-market model, particularly in agriculture. The core aim is to revive domestic production and encourage the use of locally made goods. According to the party, neoliberal economic policies have failed and are now outdated. The proposed alternative is a human-centered economy that ensures financial independence by re-establishing and strengthening the State Planning Organization. This will shift the Turkish economy from an economy in free fall ("*savrulan ekonomi*") to a planned economy (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 71) and aims to ensure both internal and external economic balance. To achieve this, the party advocates for a fair redistribution of wealth through market mechanisms, increased domestic value-added production, and a transformation from a borrower nation to a lending one. In terms of foreign trade, the party calls for a revision of free trade agreements. Exports, it argues, should align with the state's actual production

capabilities – an issue neglected by the current government in pursuit of populist politics (Zafer Partisi, 2021b). In summary, the ZP advocates a protectionist economic model, where the state takes the lead by re-introducing expert planning.

Within broader scope of the economic policy, the Planned Sustainable Development Strategy consistently refers to the Turkish Nation, claiming that it prioritizes national welfare and reflects the principles of Atatürk’s nationalism (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 65). A key element of this plan is to restore balance in public finances by eliminating current government policies that misuse public funds and distort market conditions for populist gain (Zafer Partisi, 2021b). This ties back to the party’s criticism of public spending on people under temporary protection, which they argue comes at the expense of Turkish citizens and contributes to broader economic instability. To address growing inequality, the party proposes a comprehensive tax reform aimed at lowering tax rates and eliminating the unregistered economy (Zafer Partisi, 2021b). This economic vision is frequently tied to the party’s anti-immigrant rhetoric, as the ZP argues that restoring fiscal balance and equitable access to public services is only possible through the redirection of resources currently allocated to refugees back to Turkish citizens, whom it considers the rightful beneficiaries of the welfare state.

4.2.2. Agriculture, Industry and Service Sectors

Next, the party introduces sectoral policies for agriculture, industry, and services. In the agricultural sector, the party frames the issue in nationalist terms, stating, “Every inch of the homeland’s soil is valuable, and its loss due to erosion is absolutely unforgivable. Under the rule of the ZP, the land of the homeland will be restored to a level of productivity that can nourish its children living upon it” (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 81). To achieve this, legal and institutional support will be provided to farmers, drawing on Atatürk’s statement that “The true master of the nation is the villager” (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 81). According to the party, farmers have long been subjected to token support policies and reduced to guaranteed voters. The ZP promises to restore their status as the backbone of the real economy. A detailed project is also outlined, named *Kendi Kendine Yeterli Türkiye Projesi* (Self Sufficient Turkey Project) targeting farmers with purchase guarantee (Ümit Özdağ, 2023).

As part of its Agricultural Action Plan, the ZP developed a number of specific sub-plans: the Marmara Action Plan, the Thrace-Ergene Action Plan, the Action Plan for the Protection and Development of Agricultural Resources, the Strategy and Action Plan for Effective Water and Soil Management, the Action Plan for Combating Pollution and Erosion, the Action Plan for Combating Climate Change and Desertification, and the Action Plan for Flood and Drought Management (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 82). These initiatives aim to enhance rural welfare, secure the future of livestock production, and improve urban agriculture, ultimately creating a livable economy and society for future generations, defined in line with nationalist sentiments and all of them requiring a strong element of state intervention.

Regarding the industrial sector, the ZP argues that achieving a competitive economy depends on the implementation of effective economic policies that prioritize production – a reality made evident during the recent pandemic. In this context, the integration of the agricultural and industrial sectors, each governed by comprehensive internal regulations, is viewed as the key driver behind the real economy (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 89). The industrial sector is positioned as a vital component of economic growth, with its sub-sectors – mining and quarrying, manufacturing, and electricity and gas – contributing to Turkey’s position in global economic competition.

To realize these ambitions, the party introduced a Planned Sustainable Development Strategy alongside an Industrial Action Plan. These initiatives advocate for the integration of technological advancements into a transparent system involving cooperation among businesses and local and national authorities (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 90). A particular emphasis is placed on addressing the overconcentration of industrial activity in the Marmara Region, particularly in Istanbul. The party attributes this spatial imbalance to internal migration and rising living costs, further exacerbated by the influx of refugees providing cheap labor. As a solution, the party proposes the establishment of “trade and industrial corridors”, supported through a combination of public and private investment (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 92). Detailed plan of this strategy is given under a separate project named *4 Bölge 4 Deniz Projesi* (4 Regions 4 Seas Project), seeking to build harbors in İzmir, Zonguldak, Mersin and Trabzon to spread industrial production (Ümit Özdağ, 2023).

The broader industrial agenda also includes a nuclear energy plan, which aims to achieve a significant leap in production capacities through the use of nuclear technology – a highly controversial topic during the AKP administration. These plans are framed as serving the long-term welfare of the Turkish nation.

The final component of the sectoral policies is the service sector, which is envisioned to grow by utilizing locally produced goods – facilitated by the previously outlined agricultural and industrial strategies – especially within the domains of tourism, logistics, and banking (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 97). Although the party identifies additional sub-sectors under this heading, this section of the policy program remains less detailed than its industrial and agricultural counterparts. Nevertheless, it outlines plans to expand tourism by developing new destinations and promoting a variety of activities such as cultural, religious, ecological, mountainous, agricultural, thermal, winter sports, culinary, medical, fair and congress, sports, and artistic tourism (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 98). Increased tourism capacity is presented as a key component of service sector development.

4.2.3. Education

The ZP's education policy is one of the most detailed sections of its program after the sustainable economy strategy and security policy. It offers a comprehensive diagnosis of the systemic problems plaguing the Turkish education system – with a particular emphasis on the decreasing quality of education due to the refugees – and outlines proposed solutions for the next 5 and 10 years. The party views problems in the education system as one of the most urgent issues in Turkey, citing the failure to meet universal standards and the resulting lost opportunities for Turkish youth (Zafer Partisi, 2021b).

Through the proposed reforms, the party aims to provide children and young people with access to high-quality education grounded in technological, scientific, social, and cultural knowledge. In line with its ethnic nationalist ideology, the party asserts that “Education is the most fundamental duty of the state. In particular, passing on the Turkish language and the competence to use it correctly and eloquently to future generations is an indispensable and non-transferable responsibility of the state” (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 100). Emphasizing language as a core element of education supports

the party's ethnonationalist stance, where shared linguistic identity is central to exclusionary nationalist policies (Rydgren, 2018). Accordingly, while the party promotes learning at least one foreign language, it opposes education conducted entirely in foreign languages, prioritizing Turkish as the primary medium of instruction.

The stated goal of the national education program is to cultivate “good citizens” who are creative, independent, capable of critical thinking and research, and problem-solving, and who demonstrate respect for human rights, law, social order, and the natural environment (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 102). Although “national values” and the notion of “good citizenship” remain undefined, the emphasis on instilling loyalty reflects the party's nationalist vision, which often relies on ethnically defined conceptions of the nation. To achieve these objectives, the party proposes a comprehensive program spanning pre-school to higher education. For pre-school education, it emphasizes the adoption of international models that do not contradict Turkish cultural values (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 102). Overall, at all levels, education is framed as a vital mechanism for transmitting national identity to future generations, thereby ensuring the survival of the Turkish nation.

A key concern for the party within the realm of education is the issue of brain drain. The program suggests that instilling patriotism and a strong sense of national identity among young people will reduce emigration from Turkey (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 103). Through cultural and social initiatives and civic responsibility projects, students are to be encouraged to stay in and contribute to their homeland. For the children of Turkish citizens living abroad, the party proposes establishing primary schools that provide instruction in “Turkey Turkish” (*Türkiye Türkçesi*, referring to a particular way of Turkish refined from foreign words, representing what is called the ‘actual’ Turkish) to maintain unity in language, thought, sentiment, labor, and ideals, thereby preserving cultural identity (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 107).

Regarding the higher education, which is more susceptible to brain drain, the party underscores the importance of academic freedom, promising to eliminate political interference in universities (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 105) in the form of restrictions on freedom of expression or interference in research and study areas. This position

differentiates the ZP from certain European radical right parties; for instance, Viktor Orbán's government in Hungary abolished Gender Studies programs in universities (Harvard Journal of Law and Gender, n.d.). In contrast, consistent with its broader political agenda, the ZP pledges to promote and facilitate women's education (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 106).

Ultimately, the ZP envisions national education as a means to raise a generation aligned with its ideological values. The party draws upon Article 2 of Law No. 1739 on National Education (1973) to emphasize the constitutional foundations of its education policy, which is framed as raising "All members of the Turkish Nation in accordance with Atatürk's reforms and principles, and in loyalty to Atatürk's nationalism as expressed in the Constitution." This legal foundation is echoed in the party's broader aim to raise citizens who embrace Turkish culture and moral values and who respect democracy, secularism, and the rule of law. Again, the ZP's education policy reserves a major role for state action.

4.2.4. Healthcare

The party's health policy references Article 56 of the Turkish Constitution, which mandates equal access to healthcare and social security as part of the state's responsibilities (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 129). The ZP adopts a holistic approach to healthcare that not only ensures access to medical professionals but also aims to reduce the need for medical intervention in the first place. The proposed system involves a four-tier healthcare structure, ranging from family or at-home care to rehabilitative services, designed to facilitate early diagnosis and comprehensive treatment (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 130). Of course, this is also easier said than done.

A significant component of this healthcare agenda is combating drug abuse, particularly among youth. As the second most emphasized issue in the party's political discourse (Interviewee 6, 25 November 2024), drug use is portrayed as a national security threat orchestrated by external actors – such as businessmen, the PKK, Afghans, and Syrians – who allegedly aim to weaken the Turkish youth and, by extension, the nation's future (Zafer Partisi, 2021a). In this context, drug use is framed not as a domestic issue but as an exogenous attack on the imagined Turkish community (Anderson, 1981). The party declares that "Turkish youth cannot be

deceived” (Zafer Partisi, 2021a, p. 23) and pledges to support affected families, promising a future in which they will hold their healthy grandchildren.

To address the drug crisis, the party introduces the *Tertemiz Türkiye* (All-Clean Turkey) initiative, aimed at dismantling drug trafficking networks – allegedly enabled by the AKP government’s inadequate policies – while also raising awareness and providing extensive rehabilitation for users. This plan calls for collaboration among various local and central government agencies, as outlined in the party program.

4.2.5. Environment

The ZP’s environmental policy is built around the slogan “*Yaşasın Yeşil Vatan*” (“Victory to the Green Homeland”), framing environmental protection as an existential matter for both the Turkish Nation and the Turkish Republic (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 146). The party’s affection for the homeland is reflected in its perception of the land as sacred – something that must not be wasted or exploited (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 146). As in other policy domains, the environmental agenda is embedded in nationalist sentiment, emphasizing the obligation to preserve the natural environment for future generations, which aligns with the notion of an “existential matter.”

Failure to protect the environment is attributed to the ruling AKP government, which the ZP accuses of prioritizing personal and political interests at the expense of Turkey’s green spaces. This argument reinforces the overall narrative of the party’s identity and program by placing blame on the incumbent for ongoing crises (see Chapter 2.3), using a populist framework that constructs a binary between ‘us’—those who care about the country and nature – and ‘them’ – those who do not.

To address environmental degradation and leave a livable environment for future generations, the ZP proposes increasing public awareness by integrating environmental education into school curricula, along with the imposition of strict penalties for those who harm nature (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 147). While additional sustainability measures are mentioned, including the protection of water resources, the overall policy remains underdeveloped and lacks detailed planning.

4.2.6. Culture and Art

As discussed in earlier chapters (see Chapters 1.1 and 2.3), culture plays a central role in the discourse and agenda of the radical right, functioning as a key site for exclusionary rhetoric. Ethnic nationalist political actors such as the ZP often instrumentalize culture as a boundary marker distinguishing the ingroup – typically the native population – from the outgroup, most often immigrants. This strategy serves to legitimize exclusion and is reinforced by a broader populist discourse.

Within the party's broader political agenda, culture and art are aligned with Atatürk's legacy and conceptualized as the "triangulation point" (*nirengi noktası*) of the party's platform – a term that may be interpreted through a military lens (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 149). Similar to the party's approach to education and healthcare, the ZP pledges to ensure easy and equal access to culture and art, framing this as part of the Turkish Nation's survival strategy.

The party claims that, as a result of Strategic Migration Engineering (see Chapters 2.3, 3.2.2, and 3.2.4), Turkey is targeted by imperialist forces seeking to destroy its national identity by means of "ethnic invasion" through migration. This process, they argue, leads to deculturization (*kültürsüzleştirme*) and undermines the nation's existence (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 150). According to the party narrative, the Turkish people are increasingly presented not as a unified nation, but as a heterogeneous mass of disparate communities (*halklar karmaşası*), pushing Turkey toward becoming a cosmopolitan country in which its cultural and artistic heritage is obscured and marginalized (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 150). Here, spoiling national unity (through disparate communities) argument overlaps with the radical right party framework (see Chapter 1.1) in that liberal democracy favoring diversity becomes a threat (Smilova, 2021; Merkel & Scholl, 2018). The perceived disintegration due to diversity, which transforms cities into migrant camps, is framed as a form of cultural decay. In this context, portraying ethnic heterogeneity – even one that "can scarcely be described as a mosaic" (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 150) – as cultural richness is seen as a betrayal, allegedly driven by political opportunism and populist rhetoric.

In line with the party's migration discourse, culture is securitized through a nationalist framework and articulated as a domain of conflict through populist binaries. The

underlying tone of the party's cultural position favors the dominant (Turkish) culture over that of refugees, which is portrayed as a threat. This supports the attribution of populism to the party's discourse, as the juxtaposition of minority and majority cultures reinforces the 'us vs. them' distinction. The party characterizes the notion of "different cultures living together" as a betrayal, paralleling the ethnopluralist argument (see Chapter 2.3).

To combat cultural decay, the party proposes "living museology" (*yaşayan müzecilik*) and the establishment of a new institutional structure to support cultural and artistic activities. Of greater importance, however, is the emphasis on education as the primary tool for the correct transmission of culture. This is to be complemented by sports and arts programs aimed at cultivating a "high civilization" (*yüksek medeniyet*). The framing of cultural policy through civilizational terms mirrors the discourse of European radical right parties, many of which portray cultural difference – especially between Islam and Christianity – as a civilizational divide (Brubaker, 2017). The ZP's culture and art policy reflects another instance of how states are empowered by radical right political actors, by promoting a culture defined according to their own political vision.

4.2.7. Transportation and Communication

The ZP's transportation and communication policy is framed within the context of preserving the unitary structure of the state, aiming to establish seamless inter-provincial connectivity to strengthen national unity and contribute to the construction of a "high civilization" (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 153). This emphasis on national cohesion through infrastructure reflects the party's broader nationalist discourse (Smilova, 2021), in which physical connectivity serves as both a practical and symbolic means of unifying the Turkish nation. Although the party's proposals remain relatively brief and lack technical detail, it outlines a reform-oriented agenda focused on diversifying transportation modes.

Specifically, the party aims to enhance maritime, air, and railway systems for both passenger and cargo transportation, thereby alleviating over-reliance on highways (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 153). This modal shift is expected to support Turkey's Planned Sustainable Development Strategy (see Chapter 4.2), with highways

increasingly dedicated to facilitating economic and political activity (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 154). The establishment of logistics hubs along key transportation corridors is also proposed to integrate infrastructure planning with agricultural and industrial development objectives.

In terms of communication, the party advocates for a public interest-centered regulatory framework. This includes revising private telecommunications contracts to ensure greater affordability and accessibility for all citizens, while also mandating improved service quality (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 155). A key feature of the communication policy is the development of advanced cybersecurity capabilities using hardware designed only by Turkish engineers. Moreover, communication firms will be encouraged – or required – to source materials domestically, thus supporting the party’s broader economic policy that emphasizes national production and technological sovereignty. This approach not only aligns with economic nationalism but also supports strategic autonomy in digital infrastructure. As in other policy areas, the ZP’s transportation and communications policy, too, carves out a big role for the state.

4.2.8. Family, Women and Children

Social policy is another one of the most comprehensive areas of the ZP’s program and is framed through a nationalist lens that places the family at the center of ‘social’. The party asserts that “family is the foundation of society”, and the strength of the national community depends on the strength of its families (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 157). The party’s conceptualization of nationalism thus includes a vision of cohesive, self-sufficient, and culturally aligned family units. This foundational approach underpins a broader promise to enhance the family structure by supporting marriage, childbearing, housing, employment, and participation in cultural and artistic life (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 157).

The party’s emphasis on family can also be interpreted as an extension of its anti-immigrant discourse, where families serve as guarantors of national continuity through reproduction – not just of future generations, but of language, culture, and moral values. Within this framework, social policies aim to meet the needs of every member of the “Turkish Nation” (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 157), a term that implicitly

excludes *others* consistent with the master frame (Rydgren, 2018) of the radical right – (ethno)nationalism, populism, xenophobia, nativism, authoritarianism (Hjerm, 1998; Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2007; Betz, 2019; Rzepnikowska, 2019; Morgül, 2022; Newth, 2023). To this end, the party pledges expanded community healthcare services, social security benefits for vulnerable groups (including people with disabilities, families of martyrs, women, and youth), increased pensions, and financial assistance for the impoverished (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 158). These initiatives are framed as a step toward adopting a model of social democracy consistent with constitutional principles. But, overall, they don't seem to be very different from the AKP policies since 2002.

In the domain of labor and social security, the party affirms its commitment to International Labour Organization (ILO) norms, advocating for a sustainable working environment grounded in labor peace, union rights, and freedom of political participation (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 158). These policies are complemented by pledges to restore meritocracy in public appointments and improve public employee compensation, aligning with the party's earlier proposals for state restructuring. Furthermore, targeted social assistance – including child, food, fuel, clothing, and marriage allowances – is presented as a mechanism to reinforce familial stability (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 167).

Although the family is a focal point of social policy, women and children are discussed separately rather than within the framework of family. Women are primarily depicted as contributors to economic production who should be empowered in public life. However, the discourse later shifts toward protectionist rhetoric, particularly in discussions of abuse and violence. Here, the party proposes harsher penalties for crimes against women and children (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 175). This framing, which casts women primarily as victims in need of protection, mirrors the security discourse discussed in Chapter 3.2.4 and reinforces gendered narratives common in nationalist and right-wing populist rhetoric.

Finally, the social policy section reiterates the party's broader democratic reform agenda, calling for enhanced public participation through strengthened civil society, an Economic and Social Council composed of diverse stakeholders, and the protection

of fundamental rights such as freedom of expression and protest without discrimination (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 170).

4.2.9. Sustainable Urban and Disaster Management

This section begins with a reference to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), highlighting the objective of making cities and human settlements more inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 178). Within its sustainable urban development agenda, the ZP briefly outlines its priorities, such as creating safer cities for children, people with disabilities, and the elderly. However, the scope of this policy remains limited, offering little in terms of inclusivity for other social groups or clarity on implementation mechanisms.

Disaster management, by contrast, receives more emphasis in the party's rhetoric – particularly following the devastating earthquakes on February 6, 2023, which affected ten provinces in Turkey. As Interviewee 6 noted (25 November 2024), disaster preparedness, especially for future earthquakes, is regarded as one of the most urgent issues after immigration and drug use. Ümit Özdağ has repeatedly addressed the anticipated Istanbul earthquake through public statements and social media posts, using these warnings to underscore the inadequacy of current disaster management strategies (e.g., X entries on 16 March 2024, 18 August 2024, 9 July 2024, 10 September 2024, 17 September 2024, 23 April 2025, 25 April 2025). According to the party, centralized crisis response – concentrated in the hands of a single authority – has proven ineffective (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 179). To overcome this, the party proposes a governance model where national unity is fostered in the face of crises such as war, mass migration, and natural disasters, in coordination with a well-functioning bureaucratic state.

Despite the prominence of disaster preparedness in the party's rhetoric, detailed operational strategies are lacking. Compared to the comprehensive proposals in the *Anadolu Kalesi Projesi* (see Chapter 3) or security and foreign policy sections (see Chapter 4.14), this chapter appears underdeveloped. Nevertheless, the emphasis on national unity as a solution to existential crises is consistent with the party's overarching ethnic nationalist identity (Rydgren, 2018; Merkel & Scholl, 2019; Smilova, 2021). This framing draws heavily on recent public traumas to heighten

perceptions of threat and create a crisis atmosphere – a populist strategy that allows leaders to position themselves as the true defenders of the national interest (Erçetin & Erdoğan, 2023).

4.2.10. Aerospace and Space

The party's aerospace and space policy is built on Atatürk's maxim, "*İstikbal göklerde*" ("The future lies in the skies"), aiming to inspire younger generations and underscore national ambition in the high-tech domains. The primary goal is to align with international standards and elevate Turkey's status in global aerospace cooperation (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 181). Predictably, the policy extends beyond civil aviation and is deeply embedded in national security objectives, particularly in the context of disaster response and counterterrorism.

Despite its nationalistic and strategic framing, this policy area – like several others in the program – lacks concrete implementation strategies. The only operational detail provided is the potential use of boron resources for technological innovation (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 182). While the party claims that space warfare will gain prominence over ground, naval, and air operations in the future (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 201), this assertion appears contradictory given the lack of substantive planning or infrastructure to support such a shift. As with other vague policy areas, the discussion relies more on symbolic appeals than on actionable steps. A more comprehensive and coherent vision related to these objectives is instead embedded within the broader security policy section, which indirectly supports the party's ambitions in aerospace.

4.2.11. Highway Security

The ZP defines highway security through its aim of minimizing accidents and fatalities, which it attributes largely to drivers' faults (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 183). Given the preventable nature of most accidents, the party emphasizes institutional reform and legal regulations to reduce psychological, social, and economic harm resulting from accidents. However, like many other policy areas, this section offers few details about the nature or scope of these reforms.

To address human error, the party proposes improved traffic education and a more rigorous driver's licensing process, developed through collaboration between public

and private institutions. Additionally, the establishment of the Highway Security Research Institute and the Institution of Highway Security is intended to bring Turkey's regulatory framework in line with international and European Union standards (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 184). Notably, while the party is often critical of EU regulations on migration, it appears more receptive to EU standards in transportation and road safety.

4.2.12. Combating Corruption

Corruption is among the most heavily criticized issues in the ZP's discourse, described as having reached incomprehensible levels due to the policies and patronage networks established under the AKP government (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 184). The party invokes colonial imagery to characterize this exploitation, stating: "The plundering elites have viewed Turkey in the same way that white colonizers viewed Black Africa in the 19th century – and exploited it accordingly" (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 184). This rhetorical move reinforces the populist dichotomy of "the corrupt elite" versus "the virtuous people."

To combat corruption, the party pledges to dismantle the economic, social, and legal structures that facilitate bribery and abuse. It also promises the establishment of an effective judicial system capable of holding wrongdoers accountable (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 185). The desired societal model is one rooted in what the party describes as moral integrity (*ahlaklı*) though this concept remains undefined and contributes to the broader vagueness of the policy proposal. This section aligns closely with the earlier chapter on restructuring the state, and combining the two would enhance the policy's coherence and analytical depth.

4.3. Security and Foreign Policy

Security policies constitute the most extensive and detailed section of the party program, encompassing various initiatives that overlap with foreign policy. Given Ümit Özdağ's academic background as a professor of security studies, this section appears to draw upon technocratic expertise. Indeed, the projects presented include analyses of identified security threats and are characterized by a consistent level of strategic detail.

4.3.1. National Security and the Security Reform Agenda

The party program asserts that conceptualizations of global (in)security have shifted in the wake of the recent pandemic. Security threats are no longer limited to traditional adversaries such as foreign armies, intelligence networks, or terrorism. Rather, the list of perceived threats now includes climate change, drought, rising sea levels, mass migration, pandemics, and drug use – issues portrayed as corrosive to societal stability and thus threatening national security. Within this framework, the program states that security must begin beyond national borders, reflecting an externalization strategy. Turkey is described as being under perpetual threat due to its geopolitical and geostrategic location, a condition that has only intensified in recent years. Despite this heightened risk environment, the institutional mechanisms and state apparatus are said to be undergoing an unprecedented period of vulnerability, thereby necessitating a comprehensive reform of national security policies.

This reform is articulated under the framework of the *Çelik Miğfer Güvenlik Reform Programı* (Steel Helmet Security Reform Program), which proposes significant structural changes. The symbolic title – consistent with the party’s broader use of militaristic and nationalist imagery – evokes notions of strength, protection, and national sovereignty. The metaphor of a “steel helmet” positions security not simply as a matter of administrative or technical concern, but as an existential priority. It reinforces the narrative of a nation under siege that must be fortified through robust institutional and ideological reforms.

The first proposed reform targets the National Security Council (*Milli Güvenlik Kurulu*), which is to be elevated within the political-bureaucratic hierarchy and endowed with increased authority (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 187). In tandem, the Turkish Armed Forces (*Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri*) will be reorganized in line with a stricter national security strategy that respects military doctrines and preserves the chain of command. The program explicitly calls for the elimination of external influences, including religious sects, political interest groups, and cults, and commits to adherence to Atatürk’s ideological legacy, with an emphasis on democracy, secularism, and the rule of law (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 190). The restructured armed forces are envisioned to assume a central role in national strategy, particularly in maintaining regional stability and integrating high-tech solutions. However, it is

underscored that their expanded role will be confined to security-related matters and will not translate into a ‘militocracy’ (Rivera & Rivera, 2013). The focus on military strength is not surprising and aligns with Özdağ’s professional background and family history (see Chapter 2.3).

Technology emerges as a recurrent theme across the party’s security agenda. The use of advanced technological tools such as unmanned aerial vehicles, robotics, and artificial intelligence in the defense industry is prioritized (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 201). The program predicts that future warfare will commence with cyber-attacks and rapidly escalate into hyper wars, defined by accelerated decision-making and simultaneous operations facilitated by technological advancements (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 202). In response, Turkey is urged to adopt the most advanced technological capabilities and enhance cybersecurity infrastructure (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 226). Moreover, the notion that future wars will extend into civilian domains necessitates the creation of a unified society where the population is also prepared for conflict (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 203). This emphasis on national unity as a precondition for security aligns with the party’s ethnic nationalist ideology again, as discussed in Chapter 1.1.

The reform program continues with proposals aimed at restructuring public order and internal security, emphasizing the importance of proactive and preventive measures (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 205). In harmony with other policy domains, internal security is envisioned to rest on the pillars of a strong rule of law, democratic governance, national unity, and a free-market economy that ensures public prosperity (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 205). This societal model promotes mutual respect, solidarity, and civic responsibility, cultivating a culture of social trust and harmony. It is also expected to mitigate issues such as gender-based violence, domestic abuse, and discrimination against women and children.

With regard to internal threats, the program adopts a zero-tolerance approach to terrorism (*Terör ile mücadelede sıfır hoşgörü*) and focuses on combating mafia organizations, which are depicted as threats to the youth, public morality, and economic integrity. The mafia’s involvement in drug trafficking is framed as a major threat to the health and future of the younger generations, who are central to the

party's ethnic nationalist vision. To address terrorism, the party introduces the *Demir Güvercin Projesi* (Iron Dove Project), an 11-step strategic action plan primarily focused on combating the PKK (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 210). This initiative forms a key component of the party's broader political vision, which seeks not only to restore economic activity and trade in the Middle East but also to facilitate the return of refugees and reshape public perceptions of the party's stance on race and ideology (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 212).

Another pillar of the internal security agenda is the fight against the Gülenist movement, classified by the party as a terrorist organization under the acronym FETÖ (*Fetullahçı Terör Örgütü*). Within the framework of broader state restructuring, FETÖ is portrayed as an infiltrative force that manipulates state institutions through espionage and covert operations, diverging from conventional forms of terrorism (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 213). The party blames the ruling AKP government for enabling this infiltration and likens the FETÖ threat to a “modern Crusade.” Consequently, the reform plan is symbolically titled *Kılıçarslan Kalkanı* (Kılıçarslan Shield), inspired by the historic resistance led by Sultan Kılıçarslan during the First Crusade (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 214). This symbolic naming reinforces the party's broader identity, which relies heavily on historical analogies and metaphoric framing (see Chapter 2.3).

The campaign against non-conventional threats continues with a focus on Salafî gangs (*Selefi çeteler*) through the *Yesevi Zırhı* (Yesevi Armour) initiative, aimed at reforming security and intelligence institutions to enhance their quality and effectiveness (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 215). Although less elaborated in the program, Ümit Özdağ provides additional detail in public statements during his visits to Southeastern Anatolia. He warns that Salafî groups are undermining the national character of regions such as Hatay and even alleges the presence of foreign intelligence operatives in the area, including European agents (Ümit Özdağ, 27 November 2022). He further accuses the Directorate of Religious Affairs of financially supporting these groups, casting doubt on the trustworthiness of the state apparatus (Ümit Özdağ, 12 November 2022).

Finally, the issue of immigration and border security, addressed more extensively in Chapter 3.2.4, remains central to the party's internal security agenda. The program

argues that porous borders facilitate the entry of terrorists, drug traffickers, and irregular migrants, thereby undermining national stability. To counter this, it proposes closing the Iranian and Iraqi borders under the Iron Dove Action Plan (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 218). Effective implementation of this strategy depends on institutional reforms targeting the Security General Directorate, Gendarmerie General Command, and Coast Guard Command, with a view to enhancing their credibility and operational capacity (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 223). Additionally, the program calls for a comprehensive reorganization of intelligence services into domestic and foreign branches unified under the newly proposed Presidency of National Intelligence (*Ulusal İstihbarat Başkanlığı*). This body would recruit personnel from a newly established National Intelligence University (*Ulusal İstihbarat Üniversitesi*).

4.3.2. Foreign Policy

The ZP's foreign policy is anchored in a framework of "national political realism" (*milli siyasal gerçekçilik*), formulated in response to the intensifying geopolitical rivalries that have emerged in the post-pandemic global order (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 227). This perspective prioritizes the protection and advancement of Turkey's legitimate sovereign rights and multidimensional national interests, which are shaped by political, economic, and security-driven objectives. In articulating this realist approach, the party identifies Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's enduring maxim, "Peace at home, peace in the world" (*"Yurtta sulh, cihanda sulh"*), as a guiding principle – framing it as a timeless foundation for both internal stability and effective international engagement (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 227).

While domestic stability is pursued through efforts to strengthen national unity, sovereignty, and independence, foreign policy is envisioned as a vehicle for securing international respectability, a strong reputation, and solution-oriented diplomacy (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 228). Achieving this vision, the party argues, requires a reform of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, particularly in relation to personnel qualifications and staffing levels. The program advocates greater collaboration with professionals from academia, think tanks, and civil society to enhance the intellectual and strategic foundation of Turkey's foreign policy (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 230).

Consistent with this orientation, the party insists that foreign policy must be decoupled from the pan-Islamist agenda associated with the ruling party's alignment with the Muslim Brotherhood since 2010 (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 228). It criticizes the AKP for instrumentalizing foreign policy for electoral gain and instead pledges to recalibrate foreign policy around the "sublime interests" (*yüksek menfaatler*) of the Turkish Nation (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 229). However, the concept of "sublime interests" is never clearly defined, and as with other policy areas, the program lacks specific mechanisms for translating this vision into actionable strategies. The notion of a strong and unified interior front (*iç cephe*), repeatedly invoked in this context, is presented as a necessary foundation for conducting a truly national and autonomous foreign policy (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 230). This militarized rhetoric mirrors the war analogies used in the party's immigration discourse (see Chapter 3), reinforcing its populist self-image as the nation's protector and savior.

In terms of international alliances, the party envisions a renegotiation of Turkey's existing commitments – especially those with the United States and the European Union – on the basis of mutual respect and national sovereignty (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 231). It asserts that Turkey is not a "satellite state of the West" and demands recognition of its independent strategic role (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 231). This position appears to echo earlier framings of immigration as a Western imperial plot (see Chapter 3), reinforcing skepticism toward Western influence. Nevertheless, the party maintains that international alliances remain necessary for addressing regional and global challenges, provided that they align with Turkey's interests (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 232).

A distinctive focus of the party's foreign policy is its position on the Armenian claims regarding Armenian Genocide, which the ZP dismisses as ideological slander and a psychological-political assault on the Turkish Nation (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 233). The party stresses the importance of restoring Turkey's international reputation in this regard while promoting regional cooperation with neighboring countries. However, its strongest emphasis is placed on fostering strategic partnerships with Turkic states – Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan – as well as maintaining close ties with Turkish communities in the Balkans and the Middle East (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 234). This emphasis reflects a pan-Turkist orientation, made

explicit in the claim that “Turkey is a country with influence across a belt stretching from Azerbaijan and Western Turkestan to Eastern Turkestan and China” (Zafer Partisi, 2021b, p. 234).

The United States and European Union are often mentioned jointly, particularly in the context of their immigration policies, which are portrayed as having burdened Turkey with millions of refugees (Zafer Partisi, 2021a; 2021b). While they are still considered essential partners for regional and global stability, the party insists that this cooperation must not compromise Turkish national unity or sovereignty. The program calls for ending what it terms the “terror-supporting” activities of Western actors, viewing this as a prerequisite for a healthier alliance structure that benefits Turkey, the West, and regional security alike (Zafer Partisi, 2021b). Rather than pursuing full EU membership, the party advocates for a new model of engagement that reflects Turkey’s distinct geopolitical status.

The program also extends its foreign policy agenda to include regions such as Russia, China, the Asia-Pacific, the Middle East, Cyprus–Eastern Mediterranean, the Aegean–Greece, and the Black Sea. It promotes pragmatic alliance-building in line with national interests. In the case of Russia – due to its military presence in Syria – and more broadly under the Middle East category, the party emphasizes the importance of cooperation to facilitate the return of Syrian refugees in Turkey. It also pledges to contribute to regional stability in the Middle East. The ZP argues that regional peace depends on softening Arab and Islamist identities, which it believes fuel conflict; this, the ZP claims, would also facilitate Turkey’s broader diplomatic objectives. In this context, the party underscores its commitment to a non-interventionist foreign policy that avoids entanglement in wars, instead promoting stability and security across regions.

In conclusion, the ZP situates immigration at the heart of its foreign policy platform, portraying it as both a national and international security challenge. It advocates addressing irregular migration through strategies that resemble its counterterrorism model—by resolving the issue at its source. This involves promoting conditions for voluntary return, launching internationally supported reintegration projects in migrants’ home countries, and activating global mechanisms to curb illegal migration.

This final section of the program underscores the party's consistent framing of immigration as a multidimensional threat – social, economic, and geopolitical – positioning migration control as a key pillar of both domestic governance and foreign policy engagement.

4.4. Discussion

In sum, the ZP's broader political agenda reflects a highly centralized, security-driven, ideologically cohesive, state-led project aimed at restoring what it defines as the authentic essence of the Turkish state. Beginning with institutional reforms targeting the judiciary, military, intelligence, and bureaucracy, the party seeks to construct a disciplined and ideologically aligned state apparatus, resilient to both internal fragmentation and external threats. This vision is inseparable from the party's nationalist host ideology, under which education, culture, and security policies are particularly emphasized as key instruments for reproducing national consciousness and social cohesion. At the core of this framework lies the concept of national unity, articulated not only as a normative goal but as a strategic imperative for the survival of the Turkish nation and the recovery of its historical strength. This unity is imagined as both the foundation and product of a moral, secure, and ideologically purified republic – free from the influence of foreign actors, religious sects, and pluralist dissent. Ultimately, the ZP offers not just a bureaucratic reform agenda but a comprehensive political blueprint that redefines state–society relations in authoritarian-populist terms. In doing so, it positions the nation-state as the primary actor responsible for safeguarding identity, sovereignty, and order – resonating with a broader ideological tradition of ethnic nationalism and securitized populism.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

This dissertation examined the ZP as the first case of radical right politics in Turkey, with a specific focus on its anti-immigrant rhetoric and broader political agenda. Chapter 1 established a working definition of the radical right grounded in the secondary literature, identifying key components such as ethnic nationalism, exclusionary and inclusionary populism, xenophobia, authoritarianism, nativism, and racism. These ideological pillars collectively structure the exclusionary logic behind radical right parties and inform their anti-immigrant narratives and political programs. Although radical right parties have been an enduring feature of European politics since the 1980s, the majority of scholarship has focused on Western European cases, often neglecting developments in Eastern Europe and non-Western contexts (Mudde, 2007). This thesis fills a gap by offering an introductory yet systematic study of the ZP, drawing on interviews, party documents, and social media discourse to trace how the party conforms to and deviates from established patterns of radical right ideology and strategy. While this study contributes to Turkish political studies through an in-depth case analysis of the ZP, it also expands the broader literature on radical right parties beyond the usual European cases, thereby facilitating future comparative research.

I frame Turkey as a non-European, non-Western case in the radical right literature because it uniquely combines multiparty electoral competition with the world's largest refugee-hosting profile – a configuration that is rare outside Europe. In Latin America, for instance, the most significant recent migration flow has been the displacement of Venezuelans, numbering approximately 7 million across the region (UNHCR, 2025).

While the majority migrated to Colombia – around 2.8 million refugees and migrants – many others have been dispersed across neighboring countries, producing a more regionally distributed hosting pattern (IOM, 2024). In the Middle East, countries such as Lebanon and Jordan also host large numbers of refugees (IOM, 2024), yet they do not meet the democratic criteria associated with the European configuration of radical right politics. A similar absence of both large-scale refugee reception and competitive electoral politics can be observed in North African and South Asian contexts.

Despite clear democratic backsliding, Turkey still features nationwide multiparty elections and meaningful opposition contestation. V-Dem (2024) classifies the regime as an “electoral autocracy,” yet this remains a more competitive environment than most MENA cases commonly studied in migration politics. At the same time, Turkey has hosted one of the largest refugee populations globally for more than a decade, placing migration at the center of domestic politics in ways uncommon across non-Western regions (UNHCR, 2025). This dual configuration – electoral competition combined with mass refugee reception – proposes Turkey and the ZP as an alternative case to the Western European cases, that dominate radical right scholarship, while offering a distinctive arena in which anti-immigration appeals can be electorally mobilized. In short, I employ the category “non-European/non-Western” to highlight both Turkey’s exclusion from the conventional geographic scope of the literature and its unique blend of competitive elections and outsized refugee reception, which together make it a compelling comparative case.

By situating the ZP within the genealogy of Turkish nationalism (Chapter 2), this dissertation aims to demonstrate that the party represents both a rupture from and a continuation of previous right-wing nationalist movements such as the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) and the Good Party (İYİP). While rooted in a long-standing nationalist tradition, ZP diverges from its predecessors by elevating immigration – especially the presence of Syrian refugees – to the status of an existential threat to national unity and sovereignty of Turkey. The party constructs a crisis narrative that casts immigrants not only as an economic and cultural burden but also cast immigrants as agents of demographic and legal disruption. This narrative is operationalized through securitized language, which resonates with voters disillusioned by economic decline and perceived elite complicity. The depiction of

immigration as a threat functions as both a critique of the AKP government and as a populist strategy, positioning ZP as the authentic voice of “the people” against a corrupt and self-serving elite. Conflicting interests and strategies regarding the immigration issue – ZP’s anti-immigrant stance vs. AKP’s open-door policy – placed the AKP government at the center of populist accusation, which was once a successful political strategy of AKP for generating support. This underlines yet another significant finding of this study.

Chapter 3 analyzed how the ZP’s anti-immigrant stance has come to define its political identity. Unlike mainstream parties that treat migration as one issue among many, the ZP constructs its platform around the claim that irregular migration – particularly of Syrians under Temporary Protection – represents the country’s most urgent political problem triggering further social and economic problems. Party officials insist that this issue was not pre-planned but became central because of public concern and political opportunity, as one interviewee told me: “We are not a party established solely around this issue. However, since it was the first issue we identified, we took our initial step from there” (Interviewee 6, 25 November 2024). In framing immigration, the party strategically invokes Turkish legislation such as Law No. 6458 on Foreigners and International Protection (2013) to lend legal legitimacy to its policies, while simultaneously challenging official statistics and narratives. This dual strategy – legal appropriation coupled with epistemic contestation – mirrors techniques used by European radical right parties, who similarly cast themselves as truth-tellers exposing elite deception. The ZP operationalizes this narrative through four major discursive frames: economic, political, cultural, and security. Each of these frames reinforces the perception that the presence of immigrants threatens the cohesion, stability, and very identity of the Turkish nation. The resulting political agenda aspires to rebuild a strong and efficient state apparatus where democracy functions through merit-based bureaucracy, a re-empowered parliament, and a proper separation of powers. How much of these lofty promises are actually meant remains to be seen until the ZP holds executive power in some capacity in the future.

Chapter 4 examined the ZP’s broader political vision, revealing that immigration functions as the axis around which all policy proposals – including reforms in education, justice, culture, and security – are oriented. Although the ZP rejects the

“single-issue party” label, in one way or another its platform is dominated by migration-related concerns. Reforms are framed not only as institutional corrections but as existential imperatives to reclaim the “authentic essence” of the Turkish Republic. Incidentally, a core component of that authentic essence is state power. Almost every aspect of the ZP political program contributes at different levels to the empowerment of the state and the creation of a large state sector. Despite this ideological coherence, the party’s policy proposals often seem to be lacking in specificity and operational feasibility, with a few exceptions such as the *Anadolu Kalesi Projesi* – that deals with deportation of the refugees. This mix of thematic rigidity and programmatic vagueness allows the ZP to maintain flexibility in political messaging, adapting to changing dynamics while preserving a core narrative of national restoration.

Throughout the dissertation, it has been shown how the ZP synthesizes host ideologies – nationalism, populism, xenophobia, authoritarianism, nativism and occasionally racism – into a cohesive worldview. Exclusionary populism constructs a binary between the virtuous “native people” and dangerous “outsiders,” while inclusionary populism aligns the “people” against a corrupt political elite whose definition of the nation deviates from that of the supposed majority. Arendt’s (1951) theory of xenophobia as a violent offshoot of nationalism helps explain how the ZP portrays immigrants as threats to identity and cohesion, while Rydgren’s (2008) concept of social proximity intensifies this fear by portraying migrants as intruders in the intimate spaces of everyday life. Nativism and authoritarianism further strengthen this logic, privileging the homogeneity, security, and will of the ethnic majority over pluralism and minority rights. As Laclau and Mouffe (1985) argue, political identities are formed through antagonistic boundaries. The ZP reinforces these boundaries through a fear-based discourse that positions migrants as existential threats to Turkey’s future.

Moreover, the party’s ideological construction is shaped by nostalgia, a hallmark of many radical right movements (Elgenius & Rydgren, 2022). The ZP’s political rhetoric idealizes a pre-immigration era characterized by ethnic homogeneity, communal solidarity, and strong state institutions. This “politics of nostalgia” evokes a mythical golden age, “times of grandeur characterized by ethnic homogeneity,

cohesion, social order, and state sovereignty” (Elgenius & Rydgren, 2022, p. 1231) reflecting Boym’s (2001) and Lowenthal’s (1985) definitions of nostalgia as longing for a lost home or imagined past. The construction of golden age depends on the political interests of the present, linking collective entities, identities and political actors (Elgenius & Rydgren, 2022). In that sense, the charisma of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder and the first president of the Republic of Turkey, plays a significant role in legitimizing the ZP policies and political argumentation. Very aware that Atatürk’s historical persona had become a rallying point and counterbalance to the AKP rule, the ZP taps into that charisma and reinvents Atatürk as first and foremost a nationalist, almost like a proto-ZP leader. This helps the ZP claim that the party is a direct successor to Atatürk and the early republic.

The ZP’s employment of nostalgia further cements its appeal. By evoking an idealized past of homogenous communities, strong state institutions, and mutual solidarity, the party taps into a longing for an imagined golden age. Interviewees complain about the erosion of neighborhood bonds and communal virtues (Interviewee 6, 25 November 2024), insisting on a return to “old Turkish traditions” that purportedly guaranteed social trust and collective well-being. These nostalgic elements sharpen the boundary between “us” and “them,” casting refugees not only as economic competitors or cultural others but also as symbols of a lost communal order. The ZP’s civilizational discourse further reinforces this divide, portraying the Turkish nation as inherently superior or under siege by external actors, including the West and Arab-Muslim identity groups, paralleling ideological narratives common among European radical right parties (Brubaker, 2017). In its civilizational rhetoric, the party either depicts the West as fractured by sectarian divisions within Christianity or asserts the inherent superiority of the Turkish Nation, positioning it among the ranks of so-called “high civilizations”.

As evidence suggests, both the conceptualization and operationalization of radical right host ideologies often rely on nationalist discourse and identity construction. The ZP’s institutional origins, ideological synthesis, and symbolic repertoire mark the emergence of a new form of Turkish nationalism – more exclusionary, more legalistic, and more explicitly migration-focused than its predecessors. Seen in this light, the ZP may be called “a new face of nationalism” in Turkey. It expands the ideological

trajectory of the MHP and İYİP while simultaneously carving out a distinct and radical (right) pattern of exclusionary politics, thereby redefining the spectrum of nationalist politics in the Turkish context.

Although the ZP conforms to the archetype of radical right parties in many respects, it also exhibits localized adaptations shaped by the Turkish sociopolitical environment. Its strong secularism diverges from the Christian-civilizational rhetoric typical of Western European counterparts, while its relatively participatory internal structure appears as a response to the authoritarianism within the MHP. Despite its overt skepticism toward the EU migration policies, the ZP's references to international norms and institutions suggest a more pragmatic than a principled stance. The party's view of international actors – such as the EU, UN, or NATO – remains conditional: they are accepted so long as they do not infringe on Turkey's sovereign authority. This differs from parties like *Rassemblement National* (France), *Fidesz* (Hungary), or *AfD* (Germany), which often oppose supranational actors outright. Thus, the ZP exemplifies a hybrid formation – integrating global far-right repertoires with domestic political realities and producing a version of radical right politics that is both globally legible and locally specific.

In light of these findings, the ZP's ascent has far-reaching implications for both Turkish politics and the comparative study of radical right movements. Domestically, the party's rise signals a consolidation of exclusionary nationalism, securitized populism, and legalistic contestation that collectively challenge pluralistic norms and democratic institutions. Its framing of migration as an existential crisis legitimizes harsh exclusionary measures and cultivates a public discourse that normalizes fear, suspicion, and division. Internationally, the ZP contributes to the growing body of evidence that radical right parties are not confined to the Western European context but can take root in diverse political systems by reinterpreting core ideological motifs.

This study opens up several avenues for future research as well. First, longitudinal studies could examine whether the ZP's discourse reshapes policy agendas of other Turkish parties or, even more, whether it significantly influences the political mainstream. Second, comparative inquiries might explore how similar parties in non-Western settings operationalize legalistic and secularist strategies in their exclusionary

appeals. Third, quantitative studies could assess the long-term salience of immigration as an electoral issue and whether the ZP's personalized focus on migration yields sustained political success or limits its broader appeal. In sum, the ZP provides a critical case for understanding how radical right ideologies travel, mutate, and embed themselves in new national contexts – illuminating the complex interplay between nationalism, migration, and political identity in the twenty-first century.



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