

Perpetuating Civil Martyrdom: Exploring Erdopan's National Addresses on Historical Events

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Abstract

The piece of research investigates Turkish President Erdoğan's addresses to the nation between 2014-2020, focusing on how they reflect a necropolitical populist style. The study aims to analyse how Erdoğan uses language to maintain control, particularly through necropolitical narratives that invoke civil martyrdom and historical events to fortify his position of power. The chosen period encompasses Erdoğan's presidency, marked by a shift in Turkey's domestic policies, transitioning from democratic values to an authoritarian regime. The theoretical framework is based on critical discourse analysis, specifically focusing on the populist style as described by Benjamin Moffitt and others. This style is characterized by bad manners, an appeal to the people, and the performance of crises. Furthermore, the research connects Erdoğan's statements to necropolitics, where the idea of martyrdom, especially in the context of national historical events, is used to galvanize support and legitimize authoritarian governance. Necropolitical discourse serves to reinforce Erdoğan's image as a defender of the nation, merging populism with historical narratives to create a cohesive and potent political discourse. Hence Erdoğan's discourse in national addresses is instrumental in perpetuating his control, manipulating both the past and present to align with his authoritarian objectives, and resonating deeply with the public through emotional and moral appeals.

Keywords: Turkey, Erdoğan, populism, necropolitics, critical discourse analysis

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Introduction

Turkish President Erdoğan is among the few top government officials in the world with more than twenty years in power. He is no doubt an insurmountable factor in both domestic and international politics. These are some of the obvious reasons for the choice of the research object in this paper. Also, generally speaking, highly placed officials make public statements on different occasions to address the general public and shape public opinion on issues of national importance. This is how politicians commit to accountability and transparency – key elements of contemporary democracies. This is another reason why such a research object was chosen for this piece of research. As regards the chosen period for this investigation, it was during Erdoğan's first mandate as president (August 28, 2014 to July 19, 2018) that a shift was identified in Turkey's domestic policy that exposes transitioning from democracy to authoritarian rule and characterized by disrespect for state institutions and a violation of human rights (for details see Gümü, 2023: 183-192). What is more, during the last two decades of its rule, the AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, Justice and Development Party) gradually developed from a "pro-European Muslim democratic party to an authoritarian Islamist civilizational populist party that represses opposition, dissidents, undesired minorities, journalists and human rights advocates", starting to produce and employ "civilizational populist necropolitical narratives to stabilize and perpetuate its control over Turkey" (Yilmaz and Erturk, 2023: 1). What is more, the Guardian-commissioned study of speeches to track the rise of populist rhetoric in the last decades covering 140 world leaders found that Erdogan ranked third in terms of populist ideas conveyed (Hawkins et al., 2019).

In terms of research topic, this article draws on the research conducted by the researcher of populism Benjamin Moffitt, and attempts to apply to Erdoğan's official discourse his theoretical framework to the exploration of populism as a political style.

The addresses to the nation made with regard to the commemoration of landmark events in Turkish history fall within a broader research on Erdoğan's official discourse on various occasions. The latter encompasses the President's official messages delivered in the period 2014-2020 and retrieved from the official website of the Turkish presidency. In order to secure sufficient convenience of reference, the statements were encoded from S1 to S91 (see the abbreviated table in Appendix).

Key aspects of populism

Populists are not united by a coherent ideology; rather they use a common language characterized by the US versus THEM dichotomy. Mudde (2007) defines populism as a thin ideology, given that full-fledged ideologies offer a holistic view of how politics, the economy, and society as a whole should be ordered, whereas populism calls for dismantling the establishment without prescribing on what a new order should look like.

There have been widespread debates among academia and political analysts about the definition of the term populism (see Brubaker 2017; Moffit, 2016; Hawkins, 2009; Mudde, 2007; Müller, 2016; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017 among many other). According to Jan-Werner Müller, populism has a “set of distinct claims and [...] an inner logic” (Müller, 2016: 10). These claims can be reduced to two major ones: a country's people presumably experience a conflict with outsiders, including establishment elites, and nothing should constrain the will of the true people. In the words of the American sociologist Rogers Brubaker, the people are defined as “morally decent [...] economically struggling, hard-working, family-oriented, plain-spoken, and endowed with common sense” (Brubaker, 2017: 11). The term ‘outsiders’ is used by Kyle and Gultchin (2018), given that populists as often stoke divisions between marginalised communities as between marginalised communities and elite. Mudde (2007) assumes that populism undermines contemporary pluralism-based liberal democracy, largely due to the populist conception of legitimacy in which only the moral people are legitimate and they are called upon to carry out a values-based mission against the political elite.

Theoretical and methodological framework

The most appropriate theoretical framework within which the analysis of public statements is carried out is admittedly critical analysis of populist discourse as an integral part of the typical populist style. Many researchers have worked in this field. Yet the most suitable one is the methodology offered by Benjamin Moffitt (2016) and Ekström et al. (2018). On this basis a theoretical model has been established to meet the needs of this piece of research. Ekström et al. carry out an analysis of contextually produced linguistic and discursive choices in populist rhetorical repertoires, more specifically the communicative strategies that are deployed in mediated contexts for right-wing populist political communication. Included in the study are performances by politicians on TV news and current affairs broadcasts in Greece (Golden Dawn), France (Front National) and the UK (United Kingdom Independence Party). In particular, rhetorical devices drawing on models from socio-linguistics and discourse analysis are subject to examination: aspects of register shifts by Golden Dawn in blame attribution speeches, interactional ‘bad manners’ in a French political debate, and Nigel Farage speaking ‘candidly’ in three different contexts of news reporting from the UK. According to the study, populist style can possibly be explored in terms of a set of features and are transferrable from one socio-cultural context to another, but more usefully as a set of motivated choices among alternative semiotic resources (linguistic/discursive, interactional and visual), which have social and cultural resonance. The assumption is held that a discourse analytical approach can illuminate concepts such as the ‘appeal to the people’, ‘bad manners’ and the ‘performance of crisis’ as manifested in populist discourse. Analysis is based on the interdisciplinary cross-reference between the notion of style in political communication research, and the available literature on style in sociolinguistics and discourse studies.

Special attention is given to Moffitt's (Moffitt, 2016) investigation of populist style, as "in the contemporary political landscape that populism finds itself within is increasingly mediated and 'stylised'" (Moffitt, 2016: 36). The researcher comes up with a "nuanced and gradational" approach to populism that treats the phenomenon as a political style, situating it within the context of the contemporary mediated political landscape.

Moffitt defines populism as "the repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performances made to an audience that are used to create and navigate the fields of power that comprise the political, stretching from the domain of government through to everyday life". He argues that "bad manners" (being unpolished and incorrect), "the appeal to the people" and the "performance of crises" characterize a typical populist style, distinguishing the latter from "technocratic political style" (Moffitt, 2016: 38). The appeal to the people can take various forms: invocations of the people and their related signifiers, performative gestures used by populists to show their affinity with the people, claims against the 'political correctness' of the system coming in the form of denial of expert knowledge. A function of the appeal to the people is "a coarsening of political rhetoric, and a disregard for 'appropriate' modes of acting in the political realm" (Ibidem.), identified by Cannovan (1999: 5) as the "tabloid style" and by Ostiguy (2009) as the „low“ of a high-low axis that include use of slang, swearing, political incorrectness, and being overly demonstrative and 'colourful', as opposed to the 'high' behaviours of rigidity, rationality, composure and use of technocratic language. Another identified feature of the populists' political style is the perception of crisis, breakdown or threat and their induction "through dramatization and performance" (Moffitt, 2016: 53). Crises related to the sharp division between the citizens and their representatives can also be related to immigration, economic difficulties, perceived injustice, military threat, social change. In this context populist leaders are called upon to take immediate action and emergency is evoked.

What is more, as will become evident from the analysis of Erdoğan's official statements related to the anniversary of serious historical events, martyrdom is no longer a religious obligation as much as a patriotic duty. This term is no longer confined to the sacrifices and courage of former generations. Nor does it carry a negative connotation of the loss of life. This is a finding of the research carried out by Yilmaz and Erturk (2022, 2023), more specifically in the chapter on necropolitics in the Diyanet's sermons (Yilmaz, Erturk 2023: 69-88).

Theoretical model

The four-step theoretical model to analyze Erdogan's statements based on Moffitt's model of populist discourse is broken down into the following key elements.

1/ The people versus the elite (*US* vs. *THEM*), considering that populist rhetoric frequently divides society into the people and their adversaries, the latter often being external forces or elites.

2/ Crisis and breakdown, as populists tend to emphasize moments of crisis to highlight a threat to the nation, which they claim only they can resolve.

3/ Bad manners or directness, given that populist leaders tend to present themselves as ordinary people, speaking in a simple, direct manner to resonate with the people. We can add the notion of simplicity, taking into consideration the fact that in populist discourse, there is often a simplification of complex issues into a binary narrative of good versus evil.

4/ The performance of populism, whereby symbols and rituals that resonate with the people are invoked. In other words, populists perform national pride and unity through constant references to symbols of a country's history and independence.

Applying the model

By far the biggest number of speeches (36 in number) were devoted to commemorating landmark events in Turkish history, as well as to commenting on the topical terrorist attacks perpetrated throughout Europe and Turkey.

Applying Moffitt's model of populism analysis to Erdoğan's statements issued on the occasion of May 19 Commemoration of Atatürk, Youth, and Sports Day (S3, S21 and S43), what is to be examined is how the abovementioned four elements are structured within the discourse, along with how Erdoğan positions himself as a populist leader engaging with the nation's youth. S3 emphasizes the significance of May 19 as the beginning of Turkey's march towards independence and prosperity, drawing parallels between the spirit of that historic day and the enthusiasm of today's youth. Erdoğan praises the sacrifices made by previous generations to protect Turkey's freedom and sovereignty and urges young people to embrace their national values while remaining open to universal ones. The president expresses confidence in the youth's ability to lead Turkey forward and calls on the young people to uphold the responsibilities entrusted to them and "to understand and embrace the spirit of May 19 and duly assume its responsibility", expressing his belief that they "will work hard with the awareness of the great responsibility" and "protect our Republic with resolution" (S3). This is the day "when the national will, the spirit of unity and solidarity and an unwavering faith revived in order to eradicate the occupying forces from our land" (S21). The president strongly believes that the young people will "defend our independence and future at the cost of their lives if necessary" (S43). This is a call for martyrdom on the youth.

While S3 does not explicitly create a direct *US vs. THEM* dichotomy, subtle undertones have been identified of nationalistic populism, where Erdoğan positions Turkish youth and the "august" nation as protectors of the homeland, entrusted with the duty to resist any external control or tutelage, as becomes evident in the following quote:

"Our august nation declared to the entire world that it would neither abandon its freedom nor go under the tutelage of anyone under any circumstances" (S3).

In much the same manner in S21 Erdoğan constructs a vision of the people that focuses on youth as the future of the nation, carrying forward the historical legacy of Turkey's independence struggle. The youth is described as the "guarantee of our freedom,

independence, sovereignty, and Republic”, entrusted with the legacy of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and positioned as protectors of the nation against internal and external threats. By placing the responsibility of safeguarding the country on the youth, he elevates them to a central role in Turkey’s future, emphasizing their potential as agents of national development in fields like science, industry, technology, and arts. Erdoğan’s repeated references to Atatürk and the War of Independence connect the youth with the past, reinforcing their identity as descendants of a heroic nation that rose from subjugation to independence. Hence the idea of collective responsibility is created, along with a sense of unity and shared purpose among the population, framing the national struggle as an ongoing mission.

In S43 Erdoğan constructs the people as a glorious and unified national body with a deeply historical sense of purpose, bound by their past struggles for independence and their commitment to protect the nation’s future. The national struggle is presented as an unequalled fight for independence involving unity, solidarity, and faith, which creates an emotional link between the historical actions and the people’s present-day descendants, connecting them through a shared legacy of sacrifice and determination. Yet again the youth is attributed a central role, and is depicted as the nation’s most essential and dynamic force, adhering to national values and history. Thus the idea is reinforced that the people are unified across generations through their commitment to the same ideals.

In the three statements the *THEM* are external threats or foreign powers, which Erdoğan alludes to by speaking of the nation’s refusal to be dominated. This taps into a populist national identity that centers on resistance to outside influence and control. Although domestic elite is not directly invoked, “circles of treason and evil” are mentioned that target Turkish independence and freedom. Although these groups are not explicitly defined, this language draws on a familiar populist trope of unseen or malevolent forces working against the nation’s interests (S21). Moreover, the S21 statement subtly references the idea of Turkey being continually under siege, both historically (during Atatürk’s time) and in the present. In much the same vein Erdoğan recalls the War of Independence and the threats faced during that time in S43, thus evoking the image of an opposing force that sought to control the nation and extinguish its will for independence.

In all three statements under examination Erdoğan positions May 19 and the War of Independence as symbolic of the ongoing challenges Turkey faces. By invoking these historical moments of crisis, he creates a sense of urgency and continuity with current times. This continuous narrative of struggle carried out by the young people serves to keep the nation in a state of vigilance, implying that the Republic’s survival requires constant effort and defense. In S43 Erdoğan subtly indicates that while the war of independence was won, the responsibility to defend the nation is not over. The phrase “defend our independence and future at the cost of their lives if necessary” signals that the nation must remain alert to future crises, whether external or internal.

In all three statements, Erdoğan’s tone is highly formal, addressing youth with respect and invoking patriotic imagery. While there is no use of vulgarity or “bad manners” here,

he plays into the populist idea of being the champion of national values and the people's protector.

The speeches convey a simple yet powerful message: that the nation's independence was won through sacrifice. The framing of youth as the embodiment of hope and pride simplifies the nation's challenges into a clear mission: to protect independence and carry the nation into the future.

With regard to performativity, the following has been observed. Populist leaders present themselves as embodiments of the people's will and guardians of the nation's destiny. In S43 the president emphasizes the importance of supporting the youth and lowering the minimum candidacy age to 18, which symbolically connects him with the younger generation and underscores his role as a leader who empowers the future protectors of the nation. This aligns with populist leadership styles where the leader is seen as closely connected to the "true people" and their aspirations. Furthermore, the call for the youth to "uphold their history" and remain "adherent to national values" ties Erdoğan's leadership to the continuation of historical traditions. Thus Erdoğan frames himself as a guide who enables the youth to preserve these traditions, positioning himself as the key figure in ensuring the nation's values are passed down and protected. Erdoğan's speeches are filled with symbolic references to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the War of Independence, and May 19, all of which are deeply ingrained in Turkish national identity. In S3 "the torch lit in Samsun" refers to the start of the War of Independence, a highly symbolic moment for Turkey. By aligning his message with these national symbols, Erdoğan taps into the collective memory and emotions associated with the Republic's founding. S21 also shows that populist leaders engage in performative acts to demonstrate their closeness to the people and their role as protectors of the nation. He positions himself as guardian of the republic, with his repeated calls to action, such as "let's join hands and further elevate our country". Erdoğan concludes by invoking religious and nationalistic imagery, referring to the *adhan* (Islamic call to prayer) and the Turkish flag waving proudly. This performative gesture strengthens his connection to both national and religious sentiments, reflecting the fusion of nationalist and religious identity that is often central to his political rhetoric.

President Erdoğan delivers messages at the end of April in **commemoration of the anniversary of the Çanakkale Land Battles**, the site of famous First World War Dardanelles naval and Gallipoli Peninsula land battles (S5, S23, S50). The Gallipoli Campaign, conducted in February 1915 – January 1916, was an Anglo-French operation against Turkey intended to force the long Dardanelles channel and to occupy Constantinople. It turned out that the fleet could not succeed without military help. The plan failed to produce results because of poor military leadership in some cases, faulty tactics, the inexperienced troops, inadequate equipment, and a shortage of shells. The campaign had serious political and diplomatic repercussions, as there followed Churchill's and Asquith's resignation from government (Britannica, 2025).

The president glorifies the "sacrifices of our nation and the gallantry of our soldiers, who defended our homeland and flag, and remember with mercy our august martyrs

and veterans, who passed away" (S5). He elaborates upon the meaning of the Spirit of Çanakkale to the Turkish nation, namely "standing up to attempts of occupation, fighting for independence, believing in success and walking in unity and solidarity towards goals, even under the most difficult circumstances" (S5). In S23, Erdoğan quotes Mustafa Kemal in his address to the mothers who sent their sons to war from far away countries that "Your sons are now lying in our bosom and are in peace. After having lost their lives on this land they have become our sons as well", yet again calling on the new generations "to uphold the message of friendship, engraved with blood, lives, resolve and courage on rocks, soil and the sea in Çanakkale" (S23).

Overall, Erdogan honors the soldiers, martyrs, and veterans who defended Turkey during the Çanakkale Land Battles, extending commemoration to all soldiers from various nations who lost their lives. He calls for the transformation of shared pain into tools of friendship and peace, emphasizing the responsibility of future generations to uphold messages of friendship and peace engraved in Çanakkale's history while reiterating the call for global peace. Erdoğan argues that it is "our nation's faith and its love for homeland and independence, as was the case one century ago" that is "the biggest source of power in the fight against terrorist organizations", going on to specify that "the heroic acts that were displayed against the treacherous FETO gang on the night of July 15 and the fact that our entire nation got mobilized during Afrin operation have once again shown how alive and strong the spirit of Çanakkale is on these lands" (S50). Furthermore, the president claims that

"Just as Turkey subdued the great powers of the world in Çanakkale 103 years ago, it, today as well, has the power to foil the plots sought to be implemented by means of terrorist organizations" (S50).

As regards the first step of the analysis, the following has been identified. S5 exemplifies yet again that populist rhetoric frequently divides society into the people and their adversaries, often external forces or elites. Even though Erdoğan does not directly name enemies, he clearly identifies foreign occupation, terrorism, and attempts at tutelage as persistent threats. "Our nation, which has for ages lived free, has never allowed any sieges through any war or attack, and it never will" (S5). "Sieges" symbolize both past military occupations and current or future foreign interference. The people are constructed in a more inclusive and global sense, while still centering Turkish identity, particularly in relation to historical legacy and collective memory. In S23 Erdoğan evokes national pride by remembering the "hundreds of thousands of soldiers, martyrs, and veterans" who fought in the Çanakkale battles. What is more, soldiers from all nations are included, particularly those involved in the Gallipoli Campaign (such as the ANZAC forces from Australia and New Zealand). Thus Erdoğan extends the size of the people beyond national borders, fostering a message of reconciliation and peace. Turkey is seen as a morally righteous and compassionate nation, capable of transforming past pain into a tool for "friendship, love, and peace" (S23).

The THEM in S5 is broader and includes internal threats such as terrorist groups such as FETO and military juntas. Even though S23 does not present a direct antagonism against a domestic elite or foreign powers, there is a subtle contrast between the ordinary people and the political forces that lead to war. Erdoğan shifts the responsibility for avoiding future conflicts and wars onto “new generations” and global leaders, implying that political leadership should learn from the past and avoid repeating mistakes. This reflects criticism of elites who engage in political maneuvering or power struggles that lead to wars, positioning the ordinary people – both Turkish and international soldiers – as victims of such conflicts. Turkey's stance is implicitly contrasted with that of other global powers who engage in military interventions or political hostilities. Turkey is thus portrayed as a peace advocate.

As regards the second step of the analysis, the following conclusions have been arrived at. By invoking the Çanakkale battle in S5, Erdoğan suggests that contemporary Turkey faces similar challenges. The threat may not be a literal war, but the struggle for sovereignty, unity, and independence persists, reflecting a perpetual state of vigilance that requires the same unity and strength as in the past. In S23 Erdoğan presents the memory of the battle as a symbolic crisis from the past that contains important lessons for the present. The historical crisis serves as a reminder of the costs of conflict, and Erdoğan frames the lesson as the need to avoid future wars. This taps into the collective memory of the Turkish nation, reminding the people of their historical resilience and the importance of preserving peace.

Although Erdoğan's tone in these speeches is formal and respectful, there is an underlying directness in his message, as there are clear direct appeals to nationalism and the spirit of resistance.

As regards performativity, Erdoğan performs national pride and unity through constant references to symbols of Turkey's history and independence. The historical events are presented as enduring symbols of the nation's sovereignty and strength, as becomes evident is the quote:

“The Grand National Assembly of Turkey... will forever continue to embody the national will, national sovereignty, democracy, and our independence, as has been the case for a hundred years” (S5).

This performative rhetoric reinforces the notion of Erdoğan as the defender of the national will and democracy, placing himself as the rightful heir to the struggle that began with the founding of the Republic. The references to historical figures like Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and the martyrs emphasize continuity between past leaders and the current leadership. Çanakkale is framed as a source of moral and national guidance for future generations, transforming the battle into an ongoing symbol of Turkish unity and independence. The performance is evident in how Erdoğan embodies the role of the nation's protector and custodian of its legacy.

Apparently martyrdom has become one of the most recurring themes in the president's official statements since 2015, as becomes obvious in his messages on Victory Day on 30 August to commemorate the great offensive launched by Ghazi Mustafa Kemal's Commander-in-Chiefship on August 26, 1922, which was crowned with victory in Dumlupınar. Victory

Day on 30 August commemorates the resounding defeat of the occupying Greek armies at the Battle of Dumlupınar. The battle was part of the Great Offensive launched by the Turkish Armed Forces on August 26, 1922, under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and ended on September 18 that year (Anadolu Agency, 2019).

As Erdoğan argues, “Just like all our victories in history, it was the courage of our heroes, who sacrificed themselves without batting an eye, what was behind the August 30” (S15). The president goes on to claim that “our people are, today as well, poised to show the same self-sacrifice and courage for their independence and future as well as for the sake of their homeland, which they consider to be more precious than their lives” and “will maintain our struggle to carry Turkey to a brighter and more prosperous future” (S15). On the occasion in 2017, Erdoğan expresses his strong conviction that “Turkey preserves the same determination to defeat any threat, attack or attempt for sabotage against its economic and political independence as it did 95 years ago” (S61). He reiterates this belief by transposing the determination for self-sacrifice on the latest events then with the “unyielding fight we have been putting up against bloody terrorist organizations such as the FETO, DAESH, PKK, PYD”, concluding that “With its struggle, Turkey not only protects its citizens, but also contributes to global security” (S61).

The same topic pertaining to Turkey’s fight “for its survival against various attacks on its existence” (S62) is typical of the messages devoted to the commemoration of the concluding treaty of World War I, signed in 1923, namely the Lausanne Peace Treaty, which recognized the borders of modern Turkey. Stating that “our entire nation’s unwavering adherence to its independence [...] constitutes our biggest source of power in our fight for survival” (S62), Erdoğan yet again relates to “resistance that was put up against the July 15 bloody coup attempt” that manifests the nation’s determination to protect the “homeland, independence and will” (S62). There is other evidence that the same topic is explored in the president’s messages on the anniversary of the passing of Ghazi Mustafa Kemal, delivered on the 9 November 2016 (S75) and the same date in 2017 (S56). It comes as no surprise that S75 ends in the following words: “With the noble resistance it put up against the July 15 treason, our nation showed to the whole world that it would protect the achievements of our country at the cost of its life” (S75).

Applying Moffitt’s model of populism to Erdoğan’s statements delivered on the anniversary of the Great Victory reveals how the president employs populist rhetoric to frame the narrative of national pride, resilience, and unity against perceived threats. Erdoğan constructs a unified and heroic version of the people, closely linked to the Turkish nation. He highlights the shared national identity and the collective memory of past struggles, particularly the War of Independence and the August 30 victory. A sense of pride and duty is established among the populace. Erdoğan’s phrase “our nation broke the slavery chain” (S15) reinforces the idea of the Turkish people as inherently free and unwilling to be dominated. In S61 Erdoğan invokes the spirit of the Turkish people, celebrating their historical struggle for independence under the leadership of Ghazi Mustafa Kemal. By emphasizing the collective sacrifices and bravery of the nation, Erdoğan constructs

a narrative that glorifies the people as noble and worthy of admiration. The statement emphasizes shared identity and values, particularly through phrases like “One Nation, One Flag, One Homeland and One State” (S61). This not only fosters a sense of belonging but also positions the Turkish people as resilient defenders of their homeland. S62 highlights the entire nation's unwavering adherence to independence, including “men and women, the elderly and the young,” and creating a sense of unity across different demographics. This inclusive language reinforces the idea that everyone has a stake in the nation's survival.

Although the speeches do not directly point to specific internal elite, Erdoğan uses external threats and foreign forces as symbolic elites who seek to undermine Turkey's sovereignty. The narrative constructs enemies both inside and outside Turkey's borders. Erdoğan emphasizes the need to “foil all the traps set against our country in the north of Syria, Iraq, and the Eastern Mediterranean” (S15). This language positions foreign actors as aggressors and establishes a clear US versus THEM dynamic. In S61 Erdoğan references imperialists who opposed Turkish independence historically and contrasts this with present threats posed by terrorist organizations such as FETO, DAESH, PKK, and PYD. The narrative paints a clear picture of a struggle against oppression, suggesting that the enemies of Turkey are also enemies of freedom and democracy. This binary framing helps mobilize support by invoking fear and urgency. In S62 Erdoğan references the Sèvres Treaty as a historical document that sought to undermine Turkey's existence, depicting it as a symbol of oppression that the nation has successfully resisted through the Lausanne Treaty. This establishes a narrative of overcoming imperialism and asserting national sovereignty. Although no internal political elite is mentioned in S56, the speech implies the need to protect the Republic from current challenges, emphasizing that the nation remains resolute in defending against “attacks targeting our country” (S56).

S15 is among Erdoğan's speeches that focus on an ongoing crisis that requires decisive and courageous leadership. Erdoğan thus links modern conflicts to Turkey's historical wars, emphasizing the idea of an existential struggle. Turkey's military actions in Syria, Iraq, and the Eastern Mediterranean are portrayed as part of this continuous defense of the nation. In S61 Erdoğan discusses the August 30 Field Battle as a pivotal moment that represents the Turkish nation's declaration of will to live independently. This historical reference serves to remind the audience of past struggles and the importance of maintaining vigilance. The July 15 coup attempt is addressed as a significant recent crisis, highlighting the sacrifices made by citizens who defended democracy. By connecting this event to historical struggles, Erdoğan emphasizes yet again the continuity in the fight for independence and the need for unity during crises. In much the same vein S62 frames the signing of the Lausanne Peace Treaty as a crucial moment that established Turkey's sovereignty, implying that the nation was reborn from a crisis of existence, while the reference to the coup attempt emphasizes the notion of ongoing crises, suggesting that Turkey is continually in a struggle for survival. S56 exposes populist leaders' emphasis on moments of crisis as turning points that necessitate their leadership. Erdoğan draws on the historical crisis as a source of legitimacy for the current regime.

In terms of populist performance, the following conclusions were arrived at. S15 shows that populist leaders often embody the will of the people and present themselves as decisive, acting on behalf of the nation. Erdoğan positions himself as the guardian of Turkey's legacy and future, reflecting a paternalistic role. He channels the "inspiration and courage" (S15) of past victories and uses it to promise a continued struggle for the country's prosperity and safety. Erdoğan's religious language ("Inshallah," "I once again wish Allah's mercy") appeals to the strong religious sentiment in Turkey, reinforcing his image as not only a national leader but also a moral and spiritual guide. This religious performativity in S15 strengthens the connection between the leader and the people. In S61 and S62 Erdoğan yet again positions himself as the custodian of the Republic's legacy and the embodiment of the nation's resilience. By framing the state's fight against terrorism and attempts at sabotage as an extension of the historic struggle for independence, Erdoğan positions himself as a modern protector of the Turkish nation. His emphasis on defending both citizens and global security highlights a sense of duty and responsibility associated with leadership. E56 depicts Erdoğan as the embodiment of the people and as the saviors in moments of crisis. While this speech commemorates Atatürk, it also positions the incumbent Turkish President as the present-day custodian of Atatürk's legacy.

Conclusion

Erdoğan's statements align with Moffitt's model of populist discourse in several ways. Erdoğan emphasizes a historical and potentially ongoing crisis, frames the Turkish people as the defenders of the nation against external threats, and uses performative elements like patriotic symbols and references to history to connect with his audience. While the tone of the speeches is formal, Erdoğan nevertheless embodies the populist leader who champions national values and entrusts the people to continue the fight for the nation's future. The historical crisis narratives imply continuity with present-day challenges. There is a persistent *US vs. THEM* dichotomy, in which external and internal forces are framed as perennial threats to national sovereignty. The performance of populism via symbols of national unity, sovereignty, and independence exposes that Erdoğan positions himself as the protector of the nation's legacy. A direct appeal to Turkish nationalism, although in a formal tone, underscores the importance of national pride and collective effort. Directness is hence seen as a type of bad manners in Moffitt's terms. These elements help construct Erdoğan's image as a populist leader who continues to guide Turkey through an ongoing struggle for independence and unity.

Furthermore, the critical discourse analysis conducted of the president's national addresses exposes how he resorted to the necropolitical use of militarism and martyrdom to encourage the Turkish people to feel pride in their history and in their ancestors. This analysis confirms the shift established by the aforementioned two researchers (Yilmaz and Erturk, 2023: 1) from micro national level to the macro transnational level with the use of Islamic values such as commemoration and martyrdom. The Turkish people are encouraged

to perceive the world around them through an Islamist civilizational populist lens in which the enemies of Islam are persistently attacking Muslims, whose duty is to defend their religion and homeland, as well as the other Muslim majority lands.

Overall, President Erdoğan's statements, particularly on significant national occasions such as the commemoration of historical events like the arrival of Mustafa Kemal in Samsun in 1919 and the Çanakkale Land Battles, consistently emphasize themes of sacrifice, martyrdom, and national struggle. The president glorifies past sacrifices made for the nation's independence and calls upon the youth to embrace the spirit of these events, portraying martyrdom as a patriotic duty rather than a religious obligation. Erdogan employs a militaristic language, especially after the 2016 coup attempt, emphasizing the nation's ongoing struggle against perceived threats to its existence. He portrays Turkey as engaged in a historic battle for survival, rallying citizens to defend the country against external enemies and terrorist organizations. The president's discourse intertwines Islamic values such as martyrdom with nationalist sentiment, framing Turkey's actions domestically and internationally as part of a noble struggle against perceived adversaries of Islam and the nation. This narrative is used to foster pride in Turkish history, to galvanize support for Erdoğan's policies both at home and abroad and hence to legitimize the authoritarian rule.

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Appendix

No	occasion	link
S3	Atatürk, Youth and Sports Day, 18.05.2020	https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/speeches-state-ments/558/120256/president-erdogan-s-message-on-may-19-commemoration-of-ataturk-youth-and-sports-day
S15	Victory Day, 29.08.2019	https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/speeches-state-ments/558/109410/message-on-august-30-victory-day
S21	Atatürk, Youth and Sports Day, 18.05.2019	https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/speeches-state-ments/558/105409/president-erdogan-s-message-on-may-19-commemoration-of-ataturk-youth-and-sports-day
S23	Anzac Day, 25.04.2019	https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/speeches-state-ments/558/105127/president-erdogan-s-message-on-an-zac-day
S43	Commemoration of Atatürk, Youth and Sports Day, 18.05.2018	https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/speeches-state-ments/558/94175/president-erdogan-s-message-on-may-19-commemoration-of-ataturk-youth-and-sports-day
S50	Çanakkale Victory, 18.03.2018	https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/speeches-state-ments/558/91800/march-18th-martyrs-day-and-103rd-anni-versary-of-canakkale-victory
S56	The Passing of Ghazi Mustafa Kemal, 9.11.2017	https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/speeches-state-ments/558/87271/message-by-president-erdogan-on-the-79th-anniversary-of-the-passing-of-ghazi-mustafa-kemal
S61	Victory Day, 29.08.2017	https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/speeches-state-ments/558/83305/30-agustos-zafer-bayrami
S62	Lausanne Peace Trea-ty, 24.07.2017	https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/speeches-state-ments/558/80026/lozan-baris-antlasmasin-94-yil-donumu