Erdoğan's Populist Rhetoric and Hate Speech: Anti-Opposition Discourse and the Polarization of Turkish Politics

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the growing prevalence of populism in global political communication, with a focus on Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. It analyzes the interplay between Erdoğan's populist discourse and hate speech, with the aim of highlighting the central role that hate speech against political opposition plays in his rhetoric. The article argues that Erdoğan's polarizing populist rhetoric functions as a euphemism for hate speech and seeks to trace its development in his political speeches. Additionally, the research identifies the specific expressions of hate speech employed by Erdoğan, evaluates their intensity, and explores how his discourse constructs and perpetuates a political 'other.'

KEYWORDS: Populism, populist discourse, polarization, hate speech, Turkey, Erdoğan

Populism is surging globally, signaling an era that some scholars have termed a populist *zeitgeist* (Mudde, 2004). This resurgence, evident since the 1990s, has transformed the concept from one that predominantly described so-called 'Third World' countries with charismatic leaders to one that applies more broadly across diverse political landscapes (Mény & Surel, 2002). The phenomenon has manifested in varied forms, from the right-wing surges in Europe involving figures such as Silvio Berlusconi and Marine Le Pen to the left-wing transformations in Latin America enacted by political leaders such as Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales, extending to the shifts in American conservatism influenced by Donald Trump and marking significant impacts in the Asia–Pacific and Africa (Moffitt, 2016).

In scholarly discourse, there is debate over the form and substance of populist discourse. It has been suggested that while there are common threads in populist rhetoric, such as anti-establishment and people-centric appeals, the expression of these ideas is shaped by different political cultures and historical legacies (Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2017). Some scholars assert that European populism often blends nativist ideologies with anti-immigrant sentiment (Rydgren, 2007), whereas Latin American populism may combine leftist economic policies with strong personalistic leadership (Roberts, 2006). The current research posits that, in the context of increasing authoritarianism, such as in Turkey under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, populist discourse not only adopts anti-elite and people-centric (volkist) stances but escalates to the outright alienation of oppositional voices, thereby exacerbating political polarization (Berend, 2020; Hidalgo-Tenorio et al., 2019; Öniş, 2015; Weyland & Madrid, 2019). This study aims to reveal

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how the opposition is divided, marginalized, and turned into an object of hatred, as well as how critical voices against the government are silenced through hate speech by populist leaders. Furthermore, this article evaluates the argument that populist discourse plays a particularly significant role in consolidating the voter base through polarization. The central thesis of this analysis is that Erdoğan's Turkey presents a case in which populism not only challenges the existing elite but also reshapes the political landscape by polarizing the electorate and systematically sidelining the opposition. This study aims to contribute to the literature on the rise of populism, its connection to authoritarian sentiments, and its strategic use. Moreover, it presents a novel dataset of Erdoğan's speeches and encourages further use of computational text analysis methods for studying populist rhetoric.

This article is structured as follows: In Section 2, the theoretical underpinnings regarding the aims and elements of populist discourse are explored. Section 3 focuses on Turkish populism under Erdoğan, analyzing how his populist rhetoric intertwines with authoritarian tendencies and impacts democratic processes. The communication strategies, policy shifts, and political rhetoric that signify this unique blend of populism and authoritarianism are dissected. Section 4 presents the novel speech dataset and introduces the analytical strategy and methods used. In Section 5, the results concerning Erdoğan's populist discourse and hate speech are discussed. Finally, Section 6 concludes the article by indicating further links between regimes and populism that should be explored.

Populist Discourse, Polarization, and Hate Speech

Populism remains a controversial and elusive concept despite extensive research and varied manifestations throughout history. As Laclau (1977) noted, "'Populism' is a concept both elusive and recurrent. Few terms have been so widely used in contemporary political analysis, although few have been defined with less precision" (p. 143). It emerged as a self-description in the United States with the People's Party and was later applied to movements such as the Russian Narodniks and twentieth-century Latin American politics (Canovan, 1981; Worsley, 1969). Its meaning has shifted to emphasize the will of the people and a direct connection to leadership, transcending traditional right-left classifications (Germani, 1978). Populism's adaptability is due to its lack of core values, making it a versatile tool across the political spectrum (Taggart, 2000). It combines appeals for political equality and universal participation with authoritarian tendencies under charismatic leaders (Germani, 1978). Populism's flexibility and ambiguity make it an opportunistic ideology, often used more for persuasion than allegiance (Kazin, 1998; Mény & Surel, 2002).

Components of Populist Discourse

Laclau (2005) contends that all political discourse inherently possesses populist characteristics, asserting that the extent of populism in a movement, ideology, or discourse is determined by how much it employs equivalential logic. According to Laclau, no political movement can completely avoid populism, as every movement inevitably appeals to "the people" in opposition to an adversary, thereby establishing a social divide (p. 47). Drawing from the works of Wiles (1969), Canovan (1981), and Taggart (2000), it can be said that populist discourse is characterized by its focus on the will of the people, a stance against elitism and intellectualism, a tendency to interpret events in terms of binary oppositions and conspiracy theories, an opposition to others that often manifests as racism, and a reliance on the appeal of a charismatic leader.

According to Canovan (2002), the key concept underlying populist ideology is "the people," followed by "democracy," "sovereignty," and "majority rule," each defined through its

links with the others (p. 33). Although the notion of the people is the common denominator, the role and place of the people in any political system are highly contentious. In modern times, even the most inhumane and authoritarian regimes have—at least verbally—rationalized their authority in terms of some reference to the will of the people (Worsley, 1969). All populist movements operate under the assumption that democracy equates solely to "rule by the people." This characteristic is likely the only common element shared by all populist movements and parties (Mény & Surel, 2002). A key aspect of the people is their number. The use of this term implies that the people are numerous and in the majority. This has a practical use: "they" are numerous and thus confer greater legitimacy on those who speak in their name, in addition to providing a potential constituency that, if wholly won over, can overwhelm the forces arrayed against them (Taggart, 2000). The people are also usually framed in antagonistic terms, that is, the will of the people is synonymous with the "in" group or belonging to a fictitious "us" and they stand in antagonism to "the others" or "them."

As an extension of the glorification of the people comes the anti-elitism of populism. For populists, the people embody certain identifiable qualities. According to Wiles (1969), a major premise of populism is that "virtue resides in the simple people, who are the overwhelming majority, and in their collective traditions" (p. 166). It is because of their ordinariness and their decency that the people have the right to prevail. These qualities are usually used in a manner that contrasts them with the corruption of the elite. Populists see wisdom as residing in the common people. From the common people comes common sense, which is better than scholarly knowledge (Taggart, 2000). Furthermore, "the populist belief is that the majority opinion of the people is checked by an elitist minority" (Canovan, 1981, p. 4; Lazer, 1976, p. 259). Kazin (2017) notes that, across the political spectrum, commentators seem eager to paste the populism label on forces and individuals who have only a single significant factor in common: they are effective at blasting "the elites" or "the establishment" for harming the interests and betraying the ideals of "the people"—proud in their ordinariness—in nations that are committed, at least officially, to democratic principles (p. xi). According to Mudde (2007), populism can be defined as a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite," and argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people; in a populist democracy, nothing is more important than the "general will" of the people, not even human rights or constitutional guarantees (p. 23). Moreover, as populist governments become more authoritarian, their control and repression increase as well. However, as Germani (1978) points out, they are mostly applied to a specific part of the population, mainly intellectuals.

In the populist narrative, charismatic leaders are central, ostensibly championing the people's will in what appears to be a democratic pursuit. However, this democratic facade often converges with authoritarianism as these leaders, regardless of ideology, assert a protective and defining role, positioning themselves as the embodiment of the people's virtue and wisdom (Germani, 1978; Mény & Surel, 2002; Taggart, 2000). Their appeal lies in their extraordinary ordinariness—a deliberate contrast to the "other" politicians. They claim to stand outside the political establishment, fighting for national interests against the complex challenges embodied by the elite, thus resonating with and amplifying the public's sentiments and desires (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Panizza, 2005). Their followers, in turn, invest unwavering faith in these leaders, viewing them as singular agents of change with the unique insight required to simplify and solve issues (Pasquino, 2008). Consequently, populism serves as a mode of identification for political actors, framing their rhetoric as a battle between the common people and the powerful, tapping into a rich vein of political discourse that foregrounds the sovereignty of the people and the perceived struggle against oppression (Panizza, 2005).

Populist Polarization and Hate Speech

"The other" is a central concept in populist discourse. According to Taggart (2002), populism effectively structures political debate in three ways: it creates a "politics of simplicity," reasserts popular sovereignty as a primary value, and imposes a dichotomy on political debate (pp. 76–77). The divide between the people and the other defines the political nature of populism (Panizza, 2005). What is common to all populist discourses is the juxtaposition of the "good," besieged people with the "bad" elite and dangerous "others" (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008). Populists attack external forces as threats to the way of life and economic security of the "ordinary people" (Canovan, 2002). Populist movements typically claim that the people have been betrayed by those in charge. Although the frequency may vary across time and countries, this accusation is directed at some point against all political elites (Mény & Surel, 2002).

Mény and Surel (2002) point out that populist movements, despite their diversity, construct their rhetoric in a three-stage process. Initially, they elevate the people to a foundational status, placing them at the heart of societal and political structures. The notion of community is crucial, and the definition of the people often includes only those deemed the "authentic" members of society, sidelining groups such as the wealthy or the corrupt elite and occasionally verging on the exclusionary or even racially discriminatory tactics seen in extreme right-wing discourse. These movements typically reject traditional horizontal political divides, such as left versus right, in favor of a vertical split that unifies the people while potentially ostracizing the elite above and foreigners below.

As Pasquino (2008) notes, the cohesion of the populist movement is granted and consolidated by the identification, opposition, and, in most cases, hostility directed against particular enemies, including the establishment, politicians, the financiers of globalization, technocrats, and immigrants—essentially, "those who are not like us" (p. 28). Hostility prevents collaboration and accommodation and maintains a state of conflict, which is not conducive to an accepted democratic outcome.

Populism's homogenizing view of the people conceives of political opponents as the antipeople. Opponents become enemies: nemeses who, consciously or unconsciously, stand for the oligarchical elites and a variety of illegitimate outsiders (Finchelstein, 2019). In the battle between good and evil, it is always clear to populists on whose side the common people stand (Taggart, 2002).

The dualism inherent in populism combined with a necessary construction of the other has the potential to undermine democratic politics as populism transforms the political contestation into a moral struggle. As noted by Carlin et al. (2019), populism entails polarization not only at the political level but also within society. The divisive framing employed by polarizing leaders relies on scapegoating and the identification of enemies to rally against. This framing attempts to create bonds within the "in-group" while fostering distance from and antipathy towards the "out-group" (p. 433). As Muller (2017) highlights, for populists, the political groups outside the populist camp are no longer legitimate opponents but enemies. An often underrecognized but almost inevitable result of this process is the extensive use of hate speech by populists.

Despite its frequent use, there is no commonly accepted definition of the term "hate speech." Though most countries have adopted legislation banning expressions amounting to hate speech, definitions differ slightly when determining what is being banned. The Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers' Recommendation (1997) on hate speech defines it as follows:

> the term 'hate speech' shall be understood as covering all forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance,

>including: intolerance expressed by aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility against minorities, migrants and people of immigrant origin. (p. 107)

In this sense, hate speech includes comments that are necessarily directed against a person or a particular group of persons. According to Weber (2009), the concept of hate speech is multifaceted, encompassing several scenarios. It includes the incitement of racial hatred, which targets individuals or groups based on racial identity; it also covers the provocation of religious hatred, which can be extended to hostility toward distinctions between believers and non-believers. Moreover, the term, as defined by the recommendation on hate speech, incorporates the incitement to hatred arising from extreme nationalism and ethnocentrism, which are forms of intolerance that manifest through aggressive ideologies.

Erdoğan's Populism

The case of Turkey offers evidence of the charismatic leadership approach. Erdoğan's personality has played an important role in the success of the AKP. The 2002 parliamentary elections in Turkey saw Erdoğan and his party ascend to power, securing nearly two-thirds of the seats (363 seats won with 34% of the vote) due to the newly installed 10% threshold for parties. People voting for Erdoğan identified with him due to his background. Serving as both the prime minister and the president for a cumulative twenty-three years, Erdoğan has consistently held a decisive role in the Turkish administration. He grew up in a poor neighborhood in Istanbul and was a son of migrants who had moved to Istanbul from the eastern Black Sea coast. In his youth, he gained experience as a street seller and a soccer player, and he was an Islamist student activist in the 1970s. He was someone who represented the ambitions of the working-class citizens in Turkey, who were mostly religious, conservative, nationalist, and anti-Semitic. After the Islamist-oriented Welfare Party's electoral victory in 1994, he became the mayor of Istanbul, and his popularity continued to rise (Zürcher, 2017).

Religiosity provides a strong foundation for Erdoğan's populism in Turkey. After Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic of Turkey, pushed Islam out of the public sphere and guaranteed enforced secularism, Islamists from the 1970s onward won intense support for their efforts to restore Turkey's Muslim heritage and give the religion a more prominent role in society and politics. However, while these appeals garnered votes, they also proved dangerous, landing Erdoğan in prison for ten months and provoking the court-ordered dissolution of the party to which he belonged. Subsequently, tactical moderation enabled this personalistic plebiscitarian leader to lower this political risk while enjoying intense support from a strong plurality of Turkish voters (Weyland, 2019).

The AKP came to power with a strong anti-elitist discourse, emphasizing the victimhood of the majority at the hands of a repressive, secular, and Western-oriented minority (Aslan, 2016). Although policies in line with the European Union's demands for accession were followed up until 2010, the domestic discourse remained "local and national" (*yerli ve milli*—a phrase frequently used by Erdoğan), tied to the people and Turkey's cultural and implicitly also religious past. After the AKP's victory in the 2010 referendum, Erdoğan increasingly used open religious and nationalist references in his speeches. For example, in 2012, Erdoğan—in his role as the prime minister—declared in public how he and his party defined the role of Islam in current government politics, stating, "We have four main red [important] topics: one state, one nation, one flag and one religion" (Göğüş & Mannitz, 2016, pp. 13–14). In the 2011 election, the AKP achieved unequivocal and substantial success, garnering the support of nearly half of the overall electorate in a steady increase. Following this triumph, Erdoğan seemingly adopted strategies aimed at

retaining this significant support base, even if it meant further alienating the other half of the electorate. With this overwhelming victory, Erdoğan promptly abandoned his prior discourse on democracy and rights for the previously oppressed religious lower classes. Instead, he began to problematize some of the most fundamental rights and freedoms (Polat, 2016).

The main discursive strategy of the AKP and Erdoğan, instead of discussing the content of policy preferences, is to merge opposition actors into one homogenous group, labeling them as terrorists, a gang, or bandits, and demonizing them (Küçükali, 2015, p. 149). As a result of the discourse used by Erdoğan, Turkish society became more polarized day by day. One of the most significant instances of this polarization was the Gezi Protests, where tensions that had been building up in the society finally exploded in May 2013. On May 28, a small group of environmentalists started to camp at Gezi Park, located next to Taksim Square at the center of Istanbul. They were protesting the government's plan to destroy one of the last public parks in the city to build a shopping mall. In response, the police attacked the protesters using excessive force. The protests quickly escalated into a mass uprising and diffused across the country. The number of protesters—though government sources and others disagree on the figure—increased to over four million people across nearly every city in Turkey. Eight civilians died due to various forms of police violence, and thousands were wounded. Erdoğan framed it as an attempt to overthrow the government and even the state, labeling the demonstrators "vandals" (*çapulcular*) and "unbelievers" who had no respect for the "national will" (Zürcher, 2017, pp. 355–356).

After the Gezi Park protests and the December 17–25 corruption investigations targeting AKP ministers and the Erdoğan family in 2013, Erdoğan's rhetoric concerning joining the European Union, democratic reforms, and peace with the Kurds shifted towards an anti-Western and anti-European discourse, increasingly marked by hateful sentiments towards all opposition supporters. The fundamental antagonism that serves as the backbone of Erdoğan's populist politics is the divide it has created between "the people" and "the other," which is inevitable in populist politics. Depending on the political context, 'the other' has been the Kemalist establishment, the elite, or the Gülen movement (Tombuş, 2015). Later on, 'the other' came to include the Kurds, leftists, liberals, and all opposition to Erdoğan.

Over the years, hate speech has become a political tool for Erdoğan to maintain public support (Demir, 2021). He has been particularly confrontational with journalists. Making derogatory adjectives out of government critics' names has always been a popular part of Erdoğan's hate speeches. A TV program run by Nuray Mert, a journalist and an academic, was abruptly discontinued after Erdoğan targeted her in one of his election campaign speeches in May 2011. In his speech, Erdoğan mocked Mert's last name, which means "brave, trustworthy, and honest," and called her "Namert," meaning despicable and cowardly (Committee to Protect Journalists [CPJ], 2012, p. 13). Furthermore, Erdoğan made remarks encouraging the judiciary to act against journalists he disliked and to give them the highest possible sentence. After journalist Ahmet Şık was arrested in March 2011, Erdoğan likened his book, which had not even been published, to "a bomb" (CPJ, 2012, p. 15). When a journalist or writer makes news or comments that the government does not like, Erdoğan's accusation is ready: "agent, terrorist, traitor." Erdoğan responded to Germany's criticism of Turkish-origin German journalist Deniz Yücel's arrest in 2017 by saying that Yücel was a "German agent" and "terrorist" (Hürriyet Daily News, 2017). Erdoğan also publicly and personally threatened Can Dündar, the editor-in-chief of the daily newspaper *Cumhuriyet*, many times due to it revealing and covering a story about a variety of weapons being sent to Syria by the Turkish intelligence agency in 2015: "This slander and this illegitimate operation against the Turkish Intelligence Agency [MİT] are, in a way, an act of espionage. This newspaper got involved in this espionage activity, too" (Hürriyet, 2015).

In response to the Academics, which condemned the Turkish government's security operations in Southern Eastern Turkey through an open letter, Erdoğan started a campaign of vilification, repeatedly including this group in his speeches; he called them "vile," "equal to terrorists," and "dark" while encouraging the Turkish judiciary to take action against them (Human Rights Watch, 2016). In a speech given to a group of lawyers on April 5, 2015, Erdoğan implied that critical journalists, academics, and lawyers are terrorists by stating the following:

> Terrorism supporters in the guise of academics, spies in the guise of journalists, activists in the guise of politicians and militants in the guise of government officials are no different from members of terrorist organizations holding guns and bombs. They serve the same purpose. We have to watch out as a nation. We do not have to carry those who betray the state and the nation on our backs. (HRW, 2016, pp. 38–39)

Erdoğan has also publicly encouraged collective punishment against government critics several times, especially members of the Gülen movement. When the AKP came to power, it faced resistance from the secular army and judiciary. To overcome this, Erdoğan formed alliances with liberals, democrats, Kurds, and conservatives (The Economist, 2016). The Gülen movement, led by cleric Fethullah Gülen, who was exiled in the USA, was a religious-social group with significant influence in education, bureaucracy, media, and civil society. It was a key ally of Erdoğan in his struggle against the Kemalist state establishment, which was supported by the powerful Turkish Army. However, following his 2011 election victory and the weakening of the army's influence due to European Union reforms, a power struggle emerged. Erdoğan ultimately blamed the movement for the December 17-25 corruption investigations and positioned it as a prior enemy of both himself and the state.* Referring to the persecution of his former allies, the Gülenists, who had become his new enemies, at a party meeting in 2014, Erdoğan stated, "If this is called a 'witch hunt,' then yes, we conducting a 'witch hunt.'" He added, "In order to sterilize this dirty water that has contaminated the milk, we will either boil or molecularize it," proceeding to ask the party members and his supporters to help him with this "witch-hunt" (Hürriyet, 2014a). After the abortive coup in 2016, which Erdoğan described as "a gift from God," the vilification of the Gülen movement reached its peak. Though the coup lacked widespread support, the ruling party and Erdoğan used it as an opportunity to further consolidate their grip on power. The weakening of democratic institutions, already evident, accelerated as a result. The coup attempt prompted the initiation of purges against its alleged perpetrators, the Gülen movement, and many other opponents of the government (Dalacoura, 2017). Following the declaration of a state of emergency that lasted for two years, Erdoğan's discourse towards the opposition—characterized by an "us/them," "friends/enemies," and "patriots/terrorists" mentality—was further reinforced (Tokdoğan, 2018, p. 256).

In Turkey, more than a hundred thousand public officials were dismissed based on intelligence profiles, without any administrative or legal procedures, through the Statutory Decrees issued after the July 15 coup attempt (Human Rights Joint Platform, 2018). Referring to these people, Erdoğan said, "There will be *treason* against the state, and those who commit treason will remain within the state? These *germs, viruses, traitors* will still be there? Such a thing cannot happen. This *cleansing* has not been done yet; it is not finished yet" (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı, 2017).

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* Yavuz (2018) and Taş (2018) provide a deeper understanding of the initial cooperation between Erdoğan and the Gülen movement, followed by their subsequent power struggle.

In his speeches, Erdoğan used a sexist discourse to humiliate both women and those with different sexual orientations. In a speech on the anniversary of the Gezi events in June 2022, Erdoğan called the citizens who attended the 2013 Gezi Park protests "corrupt" and "sluts" (BiaNet, 2022). In another speech, addressing opposition parties, Erdoğan said, "I ask you: Express openly and let people know who is supporting the LGBT and who is not. We have nothing to do with the LGBT because we defend the family" (Hürriyet, 2023). Thus, he was alienating and marginalizing opposition parties, women, and citizens with different sexual orientations in the eyes of the people.

In this study, hate speech is examined within the framework of polarization, expanding it to include political and social opposition and their respective groups. Erdoğan employs political rhetoric and polarizing speeches as a euphemism for hate speech against his opponents. While he directly targets them politically in his speeches, he is also, in effect, targeting the religious and ethnic affiliations of these groups in the background. For Erdoğan, elections are battles between the 'Crescent' and the 'Cross.' He and the AKP naturally represent the 'Crescent,' while all opponents are aligned with the 'Cross.' His narrative frames a 'Crusader Alliance'—comprising 'Crusaders' and 'Zionists'—as being opposed to a strong Turkey and, therefore, as targeting him. Domestically, critical political and social groups such as the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), the Republican People's Party (CHP), and the Gülen movement are portrayed as extensions of this 'Crusader Alliance' (Stockholm Center for Freedom [SCF], 2017).

Erdoğan also does not shy away from labeling his political opponents based on their religious or ethnic identities during election campaigns. During his 2014 presidential campaign, he repeatedly stated that he was a Sunni, that the main opposition leader (CHP), Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, was an Alevi, and that the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) presidential candidate, Selahattin Demirtaş, was of Zaza-Kurdish origin (Hürriyet, 2014b). After the failed coup attempt in 2016, Erdoğan initiated a ruthless and widespread mass persecution and witch hunt against the Gülen movement, which is more tolerant of other religions and beliefs than Erdoğan and advocates for interfaith dialogue (SCF, 2017). He designated the movement as an armed terrorist organization, the Fetullahist Terror Organization (FETÖ), and launched investigations against millions of its members, many of whom had no connection to the coup or any criminal activity. Hundreds of thousands of people were dismissed from public office, detained, arrested, and convicted as terrorists in courts aligned with his government, and their properties and companies were seized. According to a 2021 report by a member of the Turkish parliament and lawyer Mustafa Yeneroğlu, members of the Gülen movement were "condemned to a social death that lasted for generations, along with their families." Within this framework, investigations were launched against nearly 2 million people for alleged membership in a terrorist organization (Yeneroğlu, 2021).

Data and Methods

Data

Text data serve as an invaluable resource for social science research on discourse and rhetoric, offering a rich substrate for analysis. It encapsulates the nuances of language, societal norms, and cultural values, thus enabling researchers to delve into the deeper layers of communication and its impact on public opinion and behavior (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013; Hunger & Paxton, 2022). By examining text data—ranging from speeches, debates, and publications to social media posts—scholars can track patterns, frequencies, and changes in language use, uncovering how particular narratives and terms gain prominence or fall out of favor. Such data are

crucial in understanding the mechanisms of influence and the power dynamics that underpin social and political discourse.

In line with these aims and uses, this study employs a text-as-data approach to analyze Erdoğan's populism. The primary source of data comprises speeches Erdoğan delivered during his tenure as both prime minister and president of Turkey, published by the Presidential Office of Turkey and sourced from the digital archives of the Presidential National Library (Cumhurbaşkanlığı Millet Kütüphanesi, n.d.). A novel dataset was created from the collected volumes; it includes over 1800 speeches Erdoğan made between 2002 and 2022.

The conceptual framework developed by the Hrant Dink Foundation's project, *Media Watch on Hate Speech*, supported by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation, Global Dialogue, and MyMedia/Niras, was primarily utilized to operationalize the speeches. These categories serve to classify the content of the speeches and provide a better understanding of how Erdoğan's hate speech is generated, both explicitly and subtly. The categories used are as follows:

- Blasphemy / Insult / Denigration: This category is defined as "any discourse that contains direct swearing, insult, or denigration about a community."
- Enmity / War Discourse: Defined as "any discourse that includes hostile, war-mongering expressions about a community."
- Exaggeration / Attribution / Distortion: This category encompasses "any discourse that features negative generalization, distortion, exaggeration, or negative attribution targeting a community as a whole, based on a specific individual or event."
- Using a Natural Element of One's Identity as a Cause for Hate-Denigration/Symbolization: This category involves "any discourse that uses various aspects of one's natural identity as an element of hate, humiliation, or symbolization" (ASULIS Report, 2016).

In line with the explained purpose and scope, the discriminatory discourse and hate speech attributed to Erdoğan were determined based on whether they feature at least one or more of these categories, and to what extent they are endorsed by them. In this context, 27 hate speech expressions used by Erdoğan towards the opposition were selected from dozens of others.

Analytical Strategy and Methods

In this research, computational text analysis serves as a pivotal instrument for dissecting complex political rhetoric. By leveraging automated methods, researchers can systematically parse vast amounts of textual data, identifying the patterns and frequencies of specific terms that may signal anti-opposition sentiment. This enables the delineation of rhetoric evolution over time and its correlation with political events, offering insights into the mechanics of persuasion and influence in public communication. This study employs a systematic strategy, commencing with the preparation of the textual corpus, followed by the application of a dictionary-based method to identify and quantify specific rhetorical constructs.

The usual steps of corpus construction, tokenization, and cleaning of the text data are followed. This step not only refines the dataset but also eliminates noise that could skew the analysis of the rhetoric under scrutiny. Following the corpus preparation, a dictionary-based approach is implemented. This method utilizes a curated lexicon of terms that are theoretically and empirically associated with anti-opposition discourse, comprising "ajan" [*agent*], "bölücü" [*separatist,* divisive], "cibiliyetsiz" [indecent, filthy *ignoble*], "çapulcu" [*looter*], "çöplük" [trash], "çukur" [*pit*], "fetö" [*Member of Fetullahist Terrorist Organization*], "hain" [*traitor*], "haşhaşi" [*hash addict, assassin*], "karanlık" [*dark*], "kemirgen" [*rodent*], "kukla" [*puppet*], "manda-cı"

[*pro-mandatory*][2], "maşa" [*tool*], "militan," [*militant*], "piyon" [*pawn*], "sapık" [*pervert, psycho*], "sapkın" [*deviant*], "sülük" [*leech*], "sürtük" [*slut*], "terörist" [*terrorist*], "tümör" [*tumor*], "vampir" [*vampire*], "vandal" [*vandal*], "virüs" [*virus*], "zillet" [*disgrace*], and "zürriyet-siz" [*infertile*].

These terms, selected for their negative connotations, are indicative of the type of language that frames opposition in a derogatory light, contributing to the polarization of discourse within the political landscape. The selected terms are reduced to their base or root form to ensure consistency across the dataset, enabling a focused analysis of the core components of the rhetoric rather than its varied linguistic expressions. To quantify the extent of anti-opposition rhetoric, a frequency analysis is conducted, counting the instances of the relevant words within each speech. This quantification facilitates the construction of the main dependent variable. This methodical approach enables researchers to dissect the intricacies of political communication and understand how discourse is shaped by and responds to the socio-political context.

While this study employs robust computational methods to analyze hate speech in populist rhetoric, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations inherent in the approach. The reliance on dictionary-based methods, for example, may lead to challenges in capturing nuanced or context-specific meanings of words. Despite these limitations, the use of supplementary qualitative analyses and triangulation with external data sources helps to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings.

Results and Discussion

The quantitative and qualitative analyses presented herein provide a substantive understanding of the nature and dynamics of Erdoğan's populist discourse over time. Figure 1 shows the ten most common words, in order, in Erdoğan's speeches based on the created dictionary: *terörist* (terrorist), *hain* (traitor), *bölücü* (separatist), *fetö* (Fetullahist Terrorist Organization), *vandal* (vandal), *zillet* (disgrace), *çukur* (pit), *militan* (militant), *kukla* (puppet), and *virüs* (virus). Terms such as "terrorist," "traitor," "separatist," and "fetö" emerge with marked frequency, signaling a strategic pattern of delegitimization aimed squarely at opposition groups.

The framework Erdoğan employs when confronting opposition actors is not merely a matter of rhetoric; rather, it is a deliberate political maneuver to cast these actors as existential threats to national security and societal cohesion. The prevalence of such language within Erdoğan's discourse is indicative of efforts to create and sustain the "political other." For Turkey, specifically under Erdoğan's rule, this translates into fueling nationalist sentiments against both the Kurdish political movement and the Gülen movement, as well as other dissident groups, thereby engendering socio-political unrest and backlash.

Erdoğan increasingly enabled the polarization of society into a spectrum, with 'traitors' serving only the corrupt elite on one end and 'patriots' supporting Erdoğan on the other. He also seems to have used the opposition as a tool to consolidate support for himself and to provide internal legitimation for his actions. The consistency and escalation of this narrative serve dual purposes: to fortify his power base and to delineate the political discourse within an us-versus-them binary.

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[2] The term "pro-mandatory" carries a strong negative connotation in the narrative of Turkish history. After the Ottoman Empire's defeat in World War I, the Allied powers occupied its territory. In response, two factions emerged: one advocating armed resistance, which would later win the War of Independence and establish the Republic, and the other, a smaller group, supporting an American mandate (protectorate) as a form of governance.

Erdoğan's rhetorical strategy is steeped in the constructs of populism, in which a distinct political identity is promulgated—one that is inclusionary for its adherents but harshly exclusionary for its detractors. Merged with the charismatic leadership of Erdoğan, which made him the Reis (translating to 'chief' in Turkish) of the people, populism has become instrumental in Erdoğan's success. His background as a figure who emerged from the working class and religious society provides a narrative of ascension that resonates deeply with a significant segment of the Turkish populace.

Figure 1
The Ten Most Common Words in Erdoğan's Anti-Opposition Rhetoric
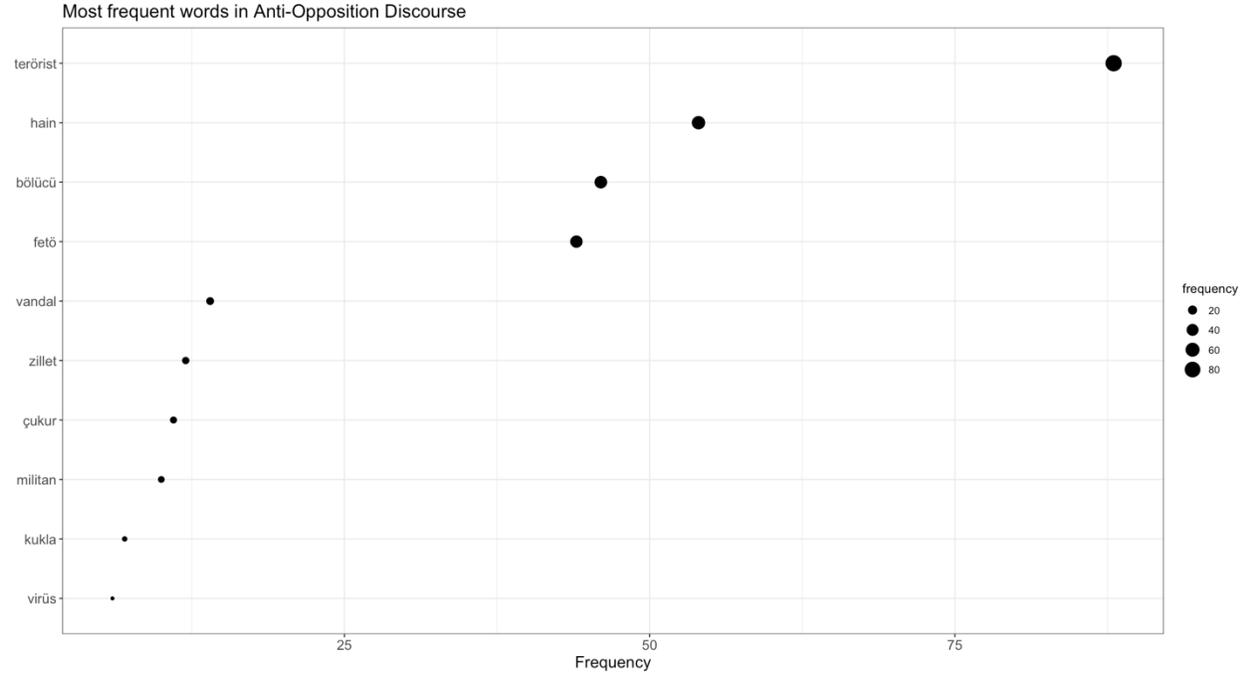
Erdoğan employs hate speech to silence political and social dissidents. He arrests journalists, academics, students, protesters, supporters of the Gülen movement, supporters of the Kurdish political movement, and other opposition groups, accusing them of being members of terrorist organizations. As a subcategory of hate speech, Erdoğan frequently utilizes methods of exaggeration, attribution, and distortion. With these characteristics, Erdoğan embodies all the discursive traits of populist leaders.

Generally, he constructs his discourse based on the following categories to maintain his rule and consolidate his power: (1) blasphemy, insult, denigration (*dark, deviant, disgrace, indecent, infertile, pervert, pit, slut, trash*); (2) enmity, war discourse (*agent, assassin, militant, pawn, puppet, pro-mandatory, separatist, terrorists, traitor*); and (3) exaggeration, attribution, distortion (*looter, vandal*).

To marginalize and criminalize the opposition, Erdoğan frequently uses expressions such as "terrorists," "traitors," "separatists," "Fetö," and "militants" against them. These expressions constitute the most commonly employed hate speech by Erdoğan. He also utilizes expressions like "puppets," "tools," and "pawns" to depict the opposition as agents of foreign powers, imperialists, and especially Westerners. By employing such hate speech, Erdoğan aims to marginalize the opposition, cast them as enemies, and portray himself as the country's savior and protector. Furthermore, Erdoğan dehumanizes his opponents—especially Gülenists—by likening them to

beings deserving of destruction, using terms such as "leeches," "tumors," "rodents," "vampires," and "viruses." This dehumanizing rhetoric frames the mass persecution of these groups as a rightful and necessary act, one that protects ¹the society—those who support Erdoğan—from evil. The effectiveness of this hate speech lies in its ability to label those who oppose or criticize Erdoğan as terrorists and "FETÖ" members, thus marginalizing them. As a result, this rhetoric intimidates society, silences opposition, and fosters a climate of fear and compliance.

Conclusion

Populism and populist discourse are on the rise worldwide. Populist politicians position themselves as the voice of their respective nations, claiming to protect the interests of their people. They often employ hate speech to marginalize opposition and minorities, portraying themselves as heroes battling the enemies of their nation. They harbor animosity toward those who question or criticize their regimes, frequently resorting to hateful language against opponents.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who has ruled Turkey as prime minister, president, and sole authority for over 23 years, employs populist strategies and discourse to maintain his power. Erdoğan's charismatic leadership has played a crucial role in consolidating support, but it has also exacerbated polarization and the use of hate speech as a political tool. This hate speech is particularly directed at journalists, academics, critics, and dissenters perceived as oppositional forces. Erdoğan's strategy has deepened divisions within Turkish society, with tensions escalating during events such as the Gezi Park protests and the corruption investigations targeting him and his government, both of which were followed by crackdowns on dissidents.

Erdoğan employs political rhetoric and polarizing speeches as euphemisms for his hate speech against his opponents. While he directly targets them politically in his speeches, he is also, in effect, targeting the religious and ethnic affiliations of these groups in the background. Through a strategy of normalization, he obscures his hate speech by labeling various opposition groups as terrorists. He uses exaggerated, distorted, and denigrating language to marginalize and criminalize his adversaries, framing them as enemies while positioning himself as the nation's protector. This rhetoric dehumanizes his opponents and legitimizes widespread human rights violations against millions in the eyes of society. This discourse fosters an environment in which dissent is equated with terrorism, thereby intimidating and silencing opposition, ultimately corrupting democracy.

This research has sought to shed light on the intricate workings of Erdoğan's populism, his anti-opposition discourse, and the polarization of Turkish politics. The findings show how hate speech, particularly in Erdoğan's case, is not merely a tool of political rhetoric but a strategic weapon for societal polarization and power consolidation. Erdoğan's use of charged phrases such as "terrorist," "traitor," "separatist," and "Fetö" in his speeches is not random; it is a deliberate strategy to delegitimize the dissidents and bolster his political position. This method not only strengthens Erdoğan's base but also contributes to the erosion of democratic norms by marginalizing dissidents and amplifying authoritarian tendencies.

The fusion of populism with a charismatic leadership style in Erdoğan's Turkey presents a unique case study within the broader context of global populism. This article's investigation into populism, anti-opposition discourse, polarization, and hate speech in Turkey provides a multifaceted lens through which the complex dynamics of current political landscapes can be understood. However, this study represents only the beginning of a larger investigation. The changing nature of populist rhetoric and its implications for democratic processes warrant further scholarly exploration, particularly in other countries where similar phenomena may arise. Future research should employ and refine computational methods for analyzing political discourse, focusing on how populism—in its various forms—interacts with and influences authoritarian

tendencies. This approach will be critical for understanding the complexities of populist speech and its impact on global politics.

The findings of this study also carry important practical implications for policymakers and civil society actors seeking to counteract the polarizing effects of populist hate speech. By understanding the rhetorical strategies and emotional appeals employed in populist discourse, policymakers can design targeted counter-narratives that promote social unity and inclusivity. Civil society organizations can use these insights to develop educational campaigns and advocacy programs that emphasize critical media literacy and foster resilience against polarizing rhetoric. These proactive measures are essential for mitigating the societal harm caused by populist hate speech and preserving democratic values.

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