

**Populist Rhetoric, Rise of Far-Right, and the Turkish Case****Popülist Söylem, Aşırı Sağın Yükselişi ve Türkiye Örneği****Ertuğrul GÖKÇEKUYU**

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**Abstract**

This article examines the long-term impacts of populist leaders, parties, and movements on the stability of democratic regimes in Europe, focusing on Germany, the Netherlands, France, Belgium, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Italy, and Austria. It highlights how populist narratives, particularly around immigration, have stoked nationalism and far-right ideologies, leading to significant electoral gains for populist parties. These developments raise concerns about the erosion of minority rights, the introduction of volatility into democratic systems, and the mainstreaming of xenophobic rhetoric. The discussion and narrative analysis also extend to Türkiye, where mass immigration from Syria since 2011 has fostered similar populist sentiments, exemplified by the rise of Prof. Dr. Ümit Özdağ's Victory Party in 2021. The article stresses the urgent need for comprehensive academic research on the long-term implications of populist rhetoric for social cohesion and political stability. The lack of such studies, especially in countries with new and different immigration dynamics like Türkiye, represents significant gaps and strategies in our understanding of how to address future challenges posed by populist threats.

**Öz**

Bu makalede popülist liderlerin, partilerin ve hareketlerin Avrupa'daki demokratik rejimlerin istikrarı üzerindeki uzun vadeli etkileri, Almanya, Hollanda, Fransa, Belçika, İsveç, Danimarka, Finlandiya, İtalya ve Avusturya'ya odaklanarak incelenmektedir. Makalede özellikle göçle ilgili popülist anlatıların milliyetçiliği ve aşırı sağ ideolojileri nasıl körüklediği ve popülist partilerin önemli seçim kazanımlarına nasıl yol açtığı irdelenmektedir. Bu gelişmeler, azınlık haklarının aşınması, demokratik sistemlere oynaklığın getirilmesi ve yabancı düşmanı söylemin ana akıma girmesi konusunda endişeleri artırmaktadır. Tartışma ve söylem analizi, 2011'den buyana Suriye'den gelen kitlesel göçün benzer popülist duyguları beslediği Türkiye'ye de uzanmakta; buna örnek olarak Prof. Dr. Ümit Özdağ'ın Zafer Partisi'nin 2021'deki yükselişi gösterilmektedir. Makalenin bulguları, popülist söylemin toplumsal uyum ve siyasi istikrar üzerindeki uzun vadeli etkileri hakkında kapsamlı akademik araştırmalara acil ihtiyaç olduğunu göstermektedir. Türkiye gibi yeni göç ve farklı dinamiklerine sahip ülkelerde bu tür çalışmaların eksikliği, popülist tehditlerin oluşturduğu gelecekteki zorluklarla nasıl başa çıkılacağına dair anlayışta ve stratejilerde önemli bir boşluklara işaret etmektedir.

**Keywords:** Far Right, Turkish Populism, Mass migration, Extreme Right, Nationalism

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Aşırı Sağ, Türk Popülizmi, Kitlesel göç, Aşırı Sağ, Milliyetçilik

## INTRODUCTION

The European Union (EU) as a supranational regional institution has a crucial role in the integration processes of its member states as it serves to be a model for democratic regionalization (Cameron, 2010 :1). As EU promotes pluralism under a shared European identity it still has not realized full-integration nor a cohesive pan-European identity (Jones et al., 2021: 1520). Nevertheless, the idea of a common European identity is a vital vision in order to sustain democratic values and inclusiveness on the continent (Tekiner, 2020: 2). One major obstacle is the rise of populist movements and waves of refugee and migration crises feeding the anti-democratic ideas (Bornschier, 2011: 126). Such crises are known to fuel the rise of far-right narratives and populist actors who capitalize on public anxieties and discontent and challenge the EU's foundational liberal and democratic principles (Karapın, 2002: 21). Most European nations such as Germany have been struggling with the idea of being an immigration country (Ellermann, 2021: 180) due to a belief that immigrants were to return one day. Once realized that Turkish immigrants were not going to return to their host countries, the political insistence on policy-making of homogeneous integration together with the promotion of democratization and liberal values became the political agenda. However, such debates paradoxically created fertile ground for the proliferation of far-right ideologies within the European countries.

These movements headed by populist leaders have learned to politically organize throughout the last decades, challenging the notion of a monolithic European identity through their responses to immigration patterns and complex socio-economic challenges (Fligstein et al., 2012: 108). According to Mudde (2019: 28), far-right populist groups represent one of the growing threats to the EU's democratic fabric. These advancements are partly driven by the EU's response to immigration, particularly in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States, which shifted political identities and contributed to the populist and xenophobic narrative. Other reasons for the rise of populism vary between feelings of cultural incompatibility, the salience of sheer large numbers of immigrants and feelings of being threatened in social, cultural and economic ways. It is though evident that the far-right's growing influence undermines the democratic processes and hinders the pursuit of an inclusive and a cohesive Europe. As such strong and negative voices keeps being a reminder of dark days on the European continent. The electoral gains of the populist leaders in recent years clearly demonstrate the need of European citizens for EU to not only promote integration and pluralism, but also address the internal contradictions and socio-political threats by what is perceived as uncontrolled immigration.

This article recharts the remarkable growth of far-right parties over the past two decades on the European continent. This phenomenon is further explored within an increasing social tension and the rise in hate crimes, racism, and Islamophobia in Türkiye. Reports of such negative events are often highlighted by the United Nations Human Rights Commission, yet actual instances of hate crimes against minorities remain underreported and inadequately documented (Bozbayındır et al., 2017: 36). The gradual yet persistent electoral gains of populist leaders are derived from available data, which provide the necessary insight to fully comprehend the rise of populism. Since the advent of Özdağ and his newly established Victory party has entered the Turkish Presidential elections for the first time in 2023 (Esen et al., 2023: 372), this article argues for the necessity to continue monitoring data that is available. Özdağ leaves a semantically rich data trail that makes analysis possible for a thorough understanding of how the Turkish version of the populist leadership gains momentum and influence. One significant historical example for how populism has evolved into far-right stems from the Netherlands. Dutch political spectrum is known for its consensus democracy where especially small political movements have greater chance to gain parliamentary representation. One such small political movement *Centrumpartij* (Centre Party, CP) belonged to Hans Janmaat who built his political career during the early eighties as an inconsequential voice against the threats of immigration (Lucardie, 2000: 3). However, Janmaat was almost never taken seriously, being ridiculed and was targeted for his so-called insignificant intolerant warnings. Janmaat's political movement did not survive the disapproval of the political establishment. The next phase in the development of Dutch populist narrative was the persuasive and charismatic liberal Frits Bolkestein's critique. Bolkestein was active during the nineties and was openly critical of immigration and argued for a full integration as well as scrutinized the loyalty of Dutch minorities

(Oudenampsen, 2023a: 12). Bolkestein's narrative compared to Janmaat had more regarding the minorities. Geert Wilders was a member of Bolkestein's liberal party during the nineties. It was towards the turn of the century when Pim Fortuyn made his entrance into the populist narrative (Oudenampsen, 2023b: 1375). Fortuyn was much more nuanced and wrote extensively on the matter of minorities. It was during Fortuyn that minorities were not mere ethnic groups but one single monolithic group of Muslims. Fortuyn's salience was more prominent on media channels and his remarks were nearing to referrals such as terrorism and radicalisation. In 2002, Fortuyn was assassinated by a left extremist right after an interview that Fortuyn had given. Wilders during his years with the liberals was critical of Bolkestein's weightless criticisms (Vossen, 2010). Wilders decided to start his own political movement called the *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV) and has been a fervent criticaster of Muslims. He too was against integration, tolerance or warned the people of Muslim invasion. Wilders has been around for twenty years and is today the largest political party in the Netherlands with a staggering 37 seats in the Dutch Parliament. New political movements in the Netherlands still are on the rise, such as that of Thierry Baudett's party Forum voor Democratie (FvD) that argues for biological differences between whites and others.

The electoral statistics used in this study are retrieved from public databases and official sites of relevant countries. Data in this paper are secondary data in order to gain deeper understanding of the populist surge. Further, this paper conducts a semantic analysis specifically focused on the video messages of the Turkish politician Prof. Dr. Ümit Özdağ who is known for his negative comments regarding Syrian and other recently refugee minorities in Türkiye. These statistics highlight the effectiveness of populist parties in resonating with a substantial segment of the electorate. Their rise is indicative of a possible future shift as it happened in the European politics, where traditional party structures and platforms are challenged by populist narratives that promise to address perceived societal grievances and institutional failures. The semantic analysis of Ümit Özdağ's video messages provide new insights into the Turkish rhetorical mechanisms. Özdağ's rhetoric, particularly his negative remarks about Syrian, Afghan, and other refugees, may be perceived as a deliberate strategy to invoke fear and discontent among the Turkish population. Özdağ frames refugees as a threat to national security, economic stability, and cultural identity, constructing public support through xenophobic sentiments. Özdağ's rhetoric is part of how populist leaders leverage language to create and sustain a sense of crisis and division.

While Özdağ's strategy has not yet culminated in electoral gain, it is probable that opportunities present themselves where Özdağ positions himself as the protectors of the Turkish interests against perceived external and internal threats. Özdağ's rhetoric is analysed as to be xenophobic and has all the elements of far-right populist rhetoric marginalizing communities but also the democratic integrity. Under methodology we outline the method employed, we delve into the theoretical foundation as a crucial step for understanding how far-right populism gains traction and how it shapes the political landscape. The methodology section further details the approach to gather and present secondary data from governmental sources and, Ozdag's remarks and public statements are analysed.

## 1. METHODOLOGY

This article employs a qualitative content analysis (Aslanidis, 2018: 1241) to examine Özdağ's public statements during the campaign period prior and after the Turkish presidential elections in 2023. To have a better understanding, the article further builds on the persistent rise of far-right movements in Western Europe as shown in Table 1. Data has been gathered from one of the most prestigious databases collected in the Netherlands called the Popu-List (Popu-List, 2024). The database collects and provides a list of European parties from all European countries and classifies political parties as populist, far left and/or far right. We have sampled those political parties that have had electoral gains over consecutive years. These are political parties in Germany, the Netherlands, France, Belgium, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Italy, and Austria. On basis of this database as verified sources electoral gains are collected in Table 1. Further election data are collected from official government statistical offices, ensuring reliability and validity. These include Kiesraad.nl in the Netherlands, Vlaanderen.be in Belgium, Bundeswahlleiter.de in Germany, Mobile.interieur.gouv.fr in France, Elezioni.interno.gov.it

in Italy, Valresultat.sevt.se in Sweden, Dr.dk in Denmark, Oikeusministerio in Finland, Valgdirektoratet in Norway, and Orf.at in Austria. These sources provide data on the vote shares of political parties, facilitating an in-depth analysis of electoral trends mainly over the past two decades and sometimes even a little more.

To examine Özdağ's public statements and remarks during and after the presidential campaign sources, including Anadolu Agency, TRT Haber, and Özdağ's own X (former Twitter) account are searched and studied. Anadolu Agency is the official news outlet in Türkiye comparable to Reuters in international sense. Further TRT Haber is the Turkish official news broadcaster while newspapers such as Milliyet, Hürriyet, and Cumhuriyet provide limited access to their archives making it limited in scope. In contrast, Anadolu Agency offers the most comprehensive archival range across different time periods, though its coverage of Özdağ's public statements lacks thoroughness. The most credible insights were derived from the videos and posts shared directly by Özdağ on his X account. For the analysis of Özdağ's public statements and quotes, a mixed-method approach was employed. Each statement was systematically catalogued and cross-referenced with available footage and news reports to ensure accuracy and context in written sources such as Anadolu agency. Qualitative content analysis was conducted to identify recurring themes, rhetoric, and the strategic framing of messages.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: POPULISM AND NATIONALISM

While nationalism is considered to be a thin ideology (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018: 1669), it is essential to differentiate between European nationalism and its manifestations in other regions. One example that may function as a different path for nationalism is how the concept is embraced a different meaning in Africa (Curtin, 1966: 143). Where the evolution of nationalism in Europe follows a distinct pattern, we see variations to nationalism in other parts of the world. European nationalism, particularly in Western Europe was shaped by socio-political conditions and historical events distinct to Europe. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, European nationalism was closely associated with colonial expansion and the assertion of cultural and racial superiority (Fichter, 2019: 337). The concept of nationalism took a different turn in African societies, particularly in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century when it emerged as a reaction against the European colonial rule. This form of nationalism unique to colonized nations revolves around the reclaim of the own identity and heritage. African nationalism in the 1930s and beyond can be understood as a movement of liberation from the "colonial yoke" representing a struggle against external threats and for the unity of African nations.

We see distinct yet similar patterns to nationalism in Latin America as a result of colonial coercion. The Latin American nations as in case of African countries saw the rooting of their nationalism as a resistance against Spanish and Portuguese rule in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The construction of national identities was shaped by the deep desire for national independence and own national sovereignty. A similar type of understanding of nationalism can be observed in Asian countries such as China and India. These interpretations diverge significantly from the European experiences, where nationalism is rather defined as exclusive. In the African context, nationalism is inclusive, embracing diverse ethnic groups within a nation united in their opposition to colonial rule. Such a divergence in interpretation is also a demonstration of how historical context plays a role in shaping nationalist ideologies.

Turkish nationalism on the other hand both resembles as well as differs from European experiences. While sharing elements such as the drive for national unity and identity, Turkish nationalism also diverges from European nationalism, as being more defensive and reconstructive in nature. Turkish nationalism became central to the creation of a unified Turkish identity following the disintegration of the Ottoman State. The new Republican vision for Türkiye was to forge a homogenized national identity under a singular national ethos by secularization and Westernization. This form of nationalism was not about expanding territory or asserting superiority over others, but about preserving and reconstructing a viable state from the ruins of a once vast state. European nationalism took a more radical turn especially during the interwar period with the rise of fascist ideologies in countries like Italy and Germany. Benito Mussolini's dictatorship in Italy (1922–1943) and Adolf Hitler's regime in Germany, nationalism became aggressive tainted with racial purity. The German nationalism influenced by Gottfried

von Herder was coined as historical romanticism while the Italian version centralized the role of the State, making both nationalist rhetoric to mobilize mass support and legitimize authoritarian rule. In this context, nationalism was often synonymous with fascism, characterized by an exclusionary and xenophobic ideology that opposed democratic principles and multiculturalism (Mosse, 1987: 224).

### 3. POPULISM VERSUS EXTREME RIGHT

At the core of populism is the belief to represent the true will of the people that is right against the elite (Eatwell & Mudde, 2004: 11). Populist narratives portray the public as possessing the highest wisdom and strongest will within society. This perception is central to the heroic image of the people that right populist leaders promote. According to Ernest Gellner (2008: 16) nationalism is driven by elites to unify and control the people to consolidate their power. For most populists' elites are corrupt, self-serving, and exploitative and argue that societal divisions benefit the elites. This emphasis on unity supports the notion that the people must come together and rally around a common purpose, forming a key pillar of populist ideology. Populist leaders argue that sovereignty belongs inherently to the people, framing representation and democratic participation as aligned with populist demands. Ralph Schroeder, in his 2020 study, challenges the permanence of categorical definitions provided by theorists like Freedman (1994). Contrary to Freedman's (1994) view that populism is a thin ideology, Schroeder's (2020) research implies that contemporary populism is adapting to modern contexts and conditions, potentially gaining more complexity and stability over time.

From a theoretical perspective, it is necessary to evaluate whether populism qualifies as a mature ideology compared to mainstream ideologies. Freedman (1994), who examined mainstream ideologies, describes the latter as a complex structure formed by humanity with substantive content. Liberalism and socialism are therefore categorized as "thick" ideologies due to their historical depth and rich content. According to Freedman, these thick ideologies include elaborate political programs that outline detailed and purposeful plans for political change. These programs feature clear directions for governance and articulate the reasons for proposed changes. In contrast, Freedman (1994) describes populism, and more broadly nationalism, as movements that seek to create a unifying perception based on simple and superficial concepts. The observation relates populist views rely on emotional appeal rather than rational discourse aiming at swift outcomes labelling nationalism as "thin" referring to the lack of comprehensive and detailed political programs. Mudde on the other hand perceives the essence of populism lying in the dichotomy between a homogeneous and virtuous society and a corrupt, self-serving elite (Joppke, 2023: 2). This also points to the antagonistic relationship between the populace and those in power, framing populism as a movement that pits the morally pure masses against a morally compromised ruling class. Mudde's framework is also an indication to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's "General Will" (*Volonté Générale*) and seem to incorporate this principle to emphasize the existential and moral authority of "the people" in existing populist visions (Gandesha, 2018: 53).

Schroeder (2020: 16) challenges Mudde's categorization by arguing that the thick-thin dichotomy oversimplifies the complex and fluid nature of ideologies, particularly populism. In adopting Freedman's nuanced approach, Schroeder suggests that populist ideologies cannot be neatly classified into rigid categories. Populism, as Mudde and Kaltwasser (2018: 1670) presents it, hinges on three main elements: A unified, morally upright group embodying the will of the nation *the people*, a corrupt, self-interested minority in opposition to the people *the elites*, and an entity or leader who defines and articulates the boundaries of the popular group and its interests, the decision maker. Schroeder (2020) contends that these elements, while central to Mudde's (2018) definition, do not fully capture the ideological depth and variability inherent in populist movements. By focusing on the binary opposition between the people and the elites, Mudde's (2018) framework may overlook the internal diversities and dynamic evolution of populist ideologies.

The inclusion of Rousseau's General Will in Mudde's (2004: 543) conceptualization of populism is particularly contentious in Schroeder's (2020) critique. Rousseau's idea emphasizes direct democracy and the sovereignty of the collective will, which Mudde aligns with the pop-

ulist assertion of the people's moral and political supremacy. However, Schroeder points out that Rousseau's vision was not inherently nationalistic; it was about the democratic expression of a collective entity rather than a nationalist identity. This discrepancy raises questions about the applicability of Rousseau's ideas to the populist context as defined by Mudde (2018). The third point here, that is, the question of who will or will not be adopted as a people, has also been the cause of a right-left axis debate within the populist community. Because, according to the far-right populists on the right of the populism spectrum, minorities can never be part of the people-group (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2011: 4), and according to the left-leaning populists on the left of the spectrum, they highlight global economic threats that usurp the rights of working people. In this sense, Mudde (2018) adopts a classification among populists and argues that populism is a subtle ideology while making this distinction. In this sense, subtle ideologies are difficult to defend because they are in a syndrome of being contentless. In this article we argue that new examples prove Mudde and Freedman's ideas that both populism and nationalism ought to be characterized as mono-dimensional thin variations.

Populism goes hand in hand with narratives on identity and culture, as populist leaders will need to legitimize their views on foreigners by establishing a strong bond with the people (Brubaker, 2017: 371). The term identity, often referring to ethnic, religious, national, or social dimensions allows populist leaders to establish an emotional connection with the public. Such a bond is essential to increase public trust in populist leadership. The concept of culture is equally important for populist leadership to construct narratives of "us" and "them" (De la Torre, 2021: 424). Such narratives will serve a purpose of unification while creating an image of an enemy that would be the outsider. The created unity is then based on culture, language, traditions and values to create emotional bonds against foreigners. Populist narratives of identity and culture potentially embalm a strong promise of protecting peoples core values (Pronk, 2020: 19). Populist leaders will not miss opportunities to hold traditional values, norms and lifestyles of the people extraordinarily high. The people who are under grave threats by foreigners ought to be saved by rhetoric that legitimizes discrimination and even racist hinder social-democratic integration.

Far-right movements on the other hand will build upon nationalism and populism, setting themselves apart as distinct ideological forces due to their unique and extreme characteristics (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2019: 412). Nationalism solely focuses on the interest and identity of one single nation, manifesting itself from civic nationalism on shared values and institutions, to ethnic nationalism revolving around racial and ethnic homogeneity. Far-right movements typically latch on to such motives promoting an exclusionary vision that elevates racial or ethnic purity (Thorleifsson, 2021: 187). While populism thrives on the simple dichotomy (Mudde, 2018) of "people" and the "elite" promising to the former against perceived corrupt authorities, the far-right will harness populist language move even farther as protectors of the "true people" against both external and internal threats. This rhetoric may be traceable on both left as well as right political spectra together with the willingness to undermine democratic institutions. As any ideological vision such populist narratives include fundamental transformations ridding societies of racial and ethnic others. Thus, while nationalism and populism can be integral components of each other, it is the far-right's authoritarianism, and goal to change that distinctly positions it on the far end of the political spectrum.

#### 4. FAR-RIGHT POPULISM ON THE RISE IN EUROPE

After this theoretical discussion and definitions of nationalism and populism, this section of the article looks at how populist movements are reflected within the EU and its member states such as France, the Netherlands, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and Denmark. The values shown in Table 1 below indicate the rates at which the populist parties have, in general, increased their share of votes over election times. According to this Table, each party in the Table has been able to and have not only actually entered their national parliaments, but also has significantly grown over time. The most influential of these is the ultra-nationalist Giorgia Meloni, who was elected prime minister of Italy on September 25, 2022 with 26% of the vote (De Giorgi et al., 2023: 109). Again, in the Swedish elections held on September 11, 2022, the far-right party Swedish Democrats (Sweden Democrats) emerged as the second largest party in the ballot box (Aylott & Bolin, 2023: 1055).

**Table 1: Distribution of Votes of Far-Right Parties by Years<sup>1</sup>**

Election Year	Country	Party	Ratio	Party	Ratio
1993	France	National Front	5,8%		
1997	France	National Front	5,7%		
2002	France	National Front	1,9%		
2007	France	National Front	0,1%		
2012	France	Comites Jeanne	3,7%		
2017	France	Comites Jeanne	8,8%		
2022	France	Comites Jeanne	17,3%		
2006	Netherlands	Party for Freedom	6,0%		
2010	Netherlands	Party for Freedom	16,0%		
2012	Netherlands	Party for Freedom	10,0%		
2017	Netherlands	Party for Freedom	13,3%	FvD	1,3%
2021	Netherlands	Party for Freedom	11,3%	FvD	5,3%
2023	Netherlands	Party for Freedom	23,5%	FvD	2,2%
2013	Germany	Alternative for Germany	0,0%		

<sup>1</sup> The data were taken from the state statistics offices and POLITICO websites of the countries. Netherlands Kiesraad.nl, Belgium Vlaanderen.be, Germany Bundeswahlleiter.de, France Mobile.interieur.gouv.fr, Italy Elezioni.interno.gov.it, Sweden Valresultat.sevt.se, Denmark Dr.dk, Finland Oikeusministerio, Norway Valgdirektoratet and Austria Orf.at.

2017	Germany	Alternative for Germany	12,6%		
2021	Germany	Alternative for Germany	10,3%		
2013	Italy	Brothers of Italy	2,0%		
2018	Italy	Brothers of Italy	4,4%		
2022	Italy	Brothers of Italy	26,0%		
1999	Belgium	Vlaams Belang	9,9%		
2003	Belgium	Vlaams Belang	11,6%		
2007	Belgium	Vlaams Belang	12,0%		
2010	Belgium	Vlaams Belang	7,8%		
2014	Belgium	Vlaams Belang	3,7%		
2019	Belgium	Vlaams Belang	11,9%		
2010	Sweden	Sweden Democrats	5,7%		
2014	Sweden	Sweden Democrats	12,9%		
2018	Sweden	Sweden Democrats	17,5%		
2022	Sweden	Sweden Democrats	20,5%		
2011	Denmark	Danish People's Party	12,3%		

2015	Denmark	Danish People's Party	21,1%		
2019	Denmark	Danish People's Party	8,7%		
2022	Denmark	Danish People's Party	2,6%		
2011	Finland	Finns Party (Perussuomalaiset)	19.1%		
2015	Finland	Finns Party (Perussuomalaiset)	17.7%		
2019	Finland	Finns Party (Perussuomalaiset)	17.5%		
2023	Finland	Finns Party (Perussuomalaiset)	20.1%		
2009	Norway	Progress Party (Fremskrittspartiet)	22.9%		
2013	Norway	Progress Party (Fremskrittspartiet)	16.3%		
2017	Norway	Progress Party (Fremskrittspartiet)	15.3%		
2021	Norway	Progress Party (Fremskrittspartiet)	11.6%		
1995	Austria	Freedom Party of Austria	21,9%		
1999	Austria	Freedom Party of Austria	26,9%		
2002	Austria	Freedom Party of Austria	10,0%		
2006	Austria	Freedom Party of Austria	11,0%		
2008	Austria	Freedom Party of Austria	17,5%		
2013	Austria	Freedom Party of Austria	20,5%		
2017	Austria	Freedom Party of Austria	26,0%		
2019	Austria	Freedom Party of Austria	16,2%		
2023	Türkiye	Victory Party	2,25%		

Table 1 also shows that the party of Marine Le Pen, who is the daughter of the well-known politician Jean-Marie Le Pen, great success in the Presidential elections held in April 2022 in France. Compared to the 2017 elections, Marine Le Pen doubled her share of votes. In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders' growth progressed at a slightly slower pace, but in the 2023 elections, he showed a growth of 12.7%, outpacing his rivals. The other far-right party, Forum voor Democratie (FvD) in the Netherlands, shared the PVV votes due to its more ultra-racist narratives. However, the FvD was not able to maintain its momentum and lost votes in the 2023 elections. The combined rates of votes for both the PVV and the FvD amounted to a staggering 16.6% in the parliament during the 2021 elections. The populist vote did however increase to 25.7% in the 2023 elections. In Germany, on the other hand, although the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) made a very rapid rise in its early days, the electoral situation has remained with a stable 10.3% of the votes until now. If we look at the trends in the surrounding countries, it is very likely that the AfD will be able to increase its share of votes in the upcoming elections. In Belgium, the Vlaams Belang party (VB) has maintained its political position with a stable 10% of the electorate for consecutive years. On the other hand, Austria has had a relatively high populist rate of 26% in 2017 and 16.2% of the electorate in 2019. Finally, Sweden demonstrated to be one of the highest populist votes of recent times among the Scandinavian countries and has achieved a considerable success of 20.5% of the electorate. According to these observed rates, the gains of the far-right parties in the elections are quite significant in proportional terms. These parties, which are shown as in Table 1 have been formed in the last thirty years, participating in democratic elections making serious political gains. As Freedman argued seen in the previous section, economic crises are known to strengthen populist discourses. Accordingly, as it can be seen in Table 1 the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis did have an effect on the rise of populist parties. According to Noury and Roland (Noury & Roland, 2020: 421) economic and cultural factors do play significant roles in the rise of populism, as the populist rhetoric needs some factors to blame. In most cases the narrative of economic crises coupled



with the existence of minorities have also been observed within the bounds of the European Union. In this respect the European Union as the supporter of pluralistic societies is an elite club that usurp the rights of the own people both economically and culturally hurting the interests of the people. Between 2000 and 2015 populist movements were hardly a topic of interest being studied in academic sense. However since 2016 the subject has experienced an explosion in the Western academic world (Noury & Roland, 2020: 422). According to Brubaker (Brubaker, 2017: 357) it is not surprising that there are authoritarian leaders in illiberal new democracies such as Poland and Hungary, while the emergence of authoritarian figures in liberal societies such as the United States (Donald Trump), France, the Netherlands and Austria shows a reaction against the crises and elites. However, according to Christopher Lasch, populism is actually the voice of democracy, that is, *the voice of the demos* (the people), (1996) because the elites have usurped the people and their authentic voice in the name of democracy. Brubaker, on the other hand, characterizes the characteristic feature of populism as speaking on behalf of the state and in the interests of the people. According to Brubaker, Mudde's definition of populism is quite minimalist, because the concepts of "pure people" and "elite" are very permeable (2017: 363). In fact, the concept of pure people is also confusing and should be better defined, because in this simple definition Mudde vertically connects the concepts of pure people and elite. This makes Mudde's approach two-dimensional, whereas populism, although it has its characteristics, needs a multidimensional approach such as time and geography. When populism is examined much more closely, it is in a sense the *process of reminding the people that apolitical (depoliticized) and democratic principles have been forgotten* (Canovan, 2002: 32). The process of reminding this people of democracy inevitably has to take an anti-elitist tendency. Another characteristic of populism is that while it uses the means of communication for propaganda purposes, it prefers to use a rhetorical style rather than honest discourses.

In this respect, the populist communication style adopts a low and superficial communication (Ostiguy, 2009: 35). Such rhetoric has the character of creating a simplistic sexual, exaggerated, xenophobic, metamorphosing, dramatizing, rude, naughty child, anti-institutionalism and anti-intellectual image practiced by Donald Trump. In this context, such rhetoric most effectively requires a discourse to convince the public that a crisis exists in order to agitate (Moffitt, 2015: 189). Brubaker (2017) asks why populist parties show political growth but do not win. He states that in their rise, people who are pushed into isolation living in individualistic societies create a suitable ground for populist behaviour due to cultural deprivation and challenging economic conditions. He explains that today, populists have the potential to rise by using digitalized social media tools effectively. Another factor is the sociological phenomenon advocated by Craig Calhoun (1988: 221), which is the detachment of established political parties from their base and citizens, and the distance that results from this situation. The common features of the far-right parties mentioned in Table 1 are the racist ideas of these parties, especially based on xenophobia and hate speech. In this case, people who come to Western European countries as migrants or refugees cannot integrate into society and therefore pose an economic and cultural threat to the indigenous people. Geert Wilders, the leader of the Partij voor de Vrijheid, has made a statement that Muslim minorities pose a great threat to the Dutch people. Because he argues that people who are Muslims are potential terrorist activists and that Islam is a fascist religion of terror (Vossen, 2016). This fascist religion (*Wilders wil verbod op Koran*, 2007) will eventually turn the Dutch people into a minority, as Muslims are over-greeting and will soon take over the Netherlands and even the whole of Europe.

Marin Le Pen, on the other hand, stated that France *has become a jihadi university* (Jack, 2022). According to Le Pen, former Prime Minister Francois Fillon brought Islamists to power in Libya, and as a result, radical Islamists invaded France. Muslim women's headscarves are more than a religious dress for Le Pen, they are a symbol of radicalization. According to Le Pen, the headscarf should be completely banned and aims to prevent Islam, a totalitarian ideology, from developing and growing (Desai, 2022). Like Wilders, Le Pen (Visser, 2021) committed hate crimes against Muslims in 2015, saying that Muslims worship in the streets to occupy like the Nazis. Thereupon, he was tried for these hate speeches but was acquitted. Wilders, on the other hand, called out party members at a campaign rally in 2015 with the dubious meaning that they "want fewer Moroccans". He was tried in court on thousands of criminal complaints, found guilty, but got away with a small fine. The Alternative für Deutschland party, on the other hand, has made political gains in Germany and, like previous far-right parties, takes its

discourses through Muslim minorities. According to the AfD, Islam does not belong in Germany and Muslims' lifestyles and religious symbols should be banned (Reuters, 2016). For the AfD, Islam is not only at odds with the German people, but also Islam is a primitive religion that is not in accordance with modern law (*AfD Turns into the Anti-Islam Party*, 2016). In a 2016 article published in *Welt*, AfD leader Alexander Gauland stated that Islam is not equivalent to Christianity and that Islamic thought has always had the ambition to take control of a state, and therefore the Islamization of Germany poses a great danger to the German people. The AfD went further and advocated the necessity of interventions, such as the need to control the private lives of Muslim minorities. When asked whether the AfD and the Front National could form a union, Jörg Meuthen (vice president) said it would not be possible. As a reason, he explains that the Front National is socialist and nationalist, while the AfD is liberal and patriotic (*AfD Turns into the Anti-Islam Party*, 2016).

The same is true of Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia. Another recognized authority in the field of populism is Alain Gabon. According to Gabon, the rise of far-right parties in Western Europe indicates that there has been a great explosion of anti-Islamic ideas (Gabon, 2022). A few days after the Sweden Democrats emerged as the second largest party, it was Italy's turn to elect a new prime minister, Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy), a neo-fascist or post-fascist party in Gabon's parlance. Gabon reminds us that this party was founded in the 1980s by neo-Nazis and supporters of Mussolini in order to explain how wrong this choice was. According to Gabon, the far-right parties that won in Sweden and Italy should not be considered as an exception. In fact, ultra-nationalist currents have never ceased in Europe, they have only been pushed back. The existence of nationalist political currents, which seemed to be up and down, was in fact in constant fluctuation. And with each new surge, it was actually stronger than the previous wave. Poland, Hungary, Sweden, and now Italy also have far-right parties that have taken over their governments. Although these different far-right parties seem to be different in appearance, they are in an ideological bond in terms of xenophobia. This connection is perhaps best described as global Islamophobia, as these right-wing movements imitate and draw inspiration from each other. Increasingly, cross-border connections and new institutionalized political alliances are being formed. Meloni, the governments of Poland and Hungary, the GOP of the United States, the Sweden Democrats and others strongly support each other. In 2020, Meloni was elected president of the European Conservatives and Reformists, an alliance that brings together more than 40 parties.

## 5. THE TURKISH CASE

The Victory Party, (Zafer Partisi) which is a new political party in Türkiye entered the political scenery on August 26, 2021 under the leadership of Prof. Dr. Ümit Özdağ. Özdağ, who previously held various positions within the consolidated Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and later the Good Party (İYİ Parti) is an outspoken figure on immigration in Turkish politics. With the establishing of the Victory Party, Özdağ's arguments revolved around the insufficiency of current political establishment on issues of over-foreignization and thus the need for a new national perspective to deal with the threat. Taking its name from the word "victory", the party stated that it aims to take a determined stance to find solutions to Türkiye's problems and take back what belongs to the Turkish people. The VP's priority seems to revolve around the nationalist narrative and thus the protection of Türkiye's national interests. The arguments may be considered to be taking a hard and a strict position on issues such as immigration policies, the fight against terrorism and national security. The VP argues that Syrian and other refugees in Türkiye should return to their home country and demands a stricter return policy to be implemented. The VP also emphasizes that the government should re-evaluate its relations with the EU and the West to pursue a foreign policy that prioritizes national independence. Immediately after its establishment, the VP participated in the Turkish general elections in 2023. However, the VP gained a 2.25% of the votes for the parliament during 2023 general elections, which meant the Party was not able to pass the 7% electoral threshold remaining unrepresented in the Turkish parliament. However, the resolute stance and rhetoric of Özdağ ensures a certain number of growing electorates.

Özdağ with his narrative was able to construct several core themes in his political discourse that may be deemed as strategically utilized in shaping public opinion and policy narratives. An analysis of AA (Anadolu News Agency) news archives between 2011 and 2023

demonstrated that Özdağ employs a blend of nationalist rhetoric related to socio-economic concerns and a more assertive immigration policy. Central to Özdağ's message is the robust emphasis on nationalist cultural identity that invokes historical narratives and symbols to resonate with his supporters. Özdağ portrays himself as a defender of Turkish heritage and sovereignty, frequently criticizing policies perceived as undermining national unity. His discourse often contrasts Turkish values against perceived external threats, thereby framing his political stance as a guardian of national identity. In addition to nationalism, Özdağ strategically integrates socio-economic populism and addresses economic disparities. Özdağ critiques neoliberal economic models and argues for protectionist measures to safeguard Turkish industries from foreign competition. Özdağ's discourse extends beyond domestic issues and pleads for a strong military presence in addressing regional conflicts and security threats. Özdağ's narrative on Syrian refugees on his social media account between March and July 2024 comes down to "Türkiye is facing an invasion", "the true number of immigrants is not 3 million but 13 million," "immigrants are stealing our jobs", and that "the Victory Party is the defender of the rights of Turkish children and the elderly".

Özdağ's use of the term "invasion" seems to refer as a description to the influx of Syrian refugees reflects a deliberate choice of language intended to evoke a sense of urgency and existential threat. Such a framing positions refugees not as individuals seeking safety but as a collective force undermining Turkish sovereignty. Such rhetoric is designed to spur nationalist sentiments and portrays the refugee crisis as a matter of national security rather than humanitarian concern. By framing the refugee situation in this manner, Özdağ rallies support for stringent policies aimed at curtailing immigration and reinforcing national borders. Özdağ's other claim also challenges the credibility of government statistics and portrays the situation as being far more critical than presented by official narratives. Such may be seen as a choice to heighten public sentiment and create a sense of urgency. His narrative feeds into broader concerns about overpopulation, resource strain, and the potential dilution of Turkish cultural identity. The claim that immigrants are "stealing jobs" is a common refrain in anti-immigrant rhetoric globally and can also be observed in Özdağ's narrative. This narrative obviously taps into economic insecurities and fears about employment, particularly among lower-income and less-skilled segments of the Turkish population. By framing refugees as economic competitors that threaten the livelihoods of native Turks, Özdağ makes a strong appeal to those who feel economically marginalized or vulnerable. This narrative is an over-simplification of complex economic interactions taking the focus away from broader structural issues affecting employment and instead placing it on the immigrant population. In positioning the VP as the defender of Turkish children and the elderly, Özdağ seeks to cast his political movement as a protector of the most vulnerable members of society. This rhetoric is evoking empathy and moral responsibility towards native citizens, framing them as the rightful beneficiaries of public resources and support. The strategic commitment of the VP to as the guardian of the interests of vulnerable groups, Özdağ aims to draw a stark contrast between his party's priorities and those of other political actors:

"We are lied to, I thought in my city Gaziantep 800,000 Syrians, I was corrected by journalists that there only in one neighbourhood there are 830,000 and that trade has been changing *hands and Syrians are taking the economy over.*" (March 9, 2024)

Özdağ's assertion highlights a perception that the Syrian refugee population in Türkiye is much larger than officially acknowledged that is concentrated in eastern cities such as Gaziantep. He expresses concern that Syrians are increasingly dominating local economies, which suggests a fear of economic displacement among Turkish citizens. This quote underlines a growing narrative that the refugee presence is altering the economic landscape, potentially creating tension between Turks and Syrians over economic opportunities and business ownership.

"They do not pay taxes and Syrians do not trade with the Turks." (March 9, 2024)

Here, Özdağ claims that Syrians do not contribute to the Turkish tax system and segregate themselves economically by not engaging in trade with Turkish nationals. This

reinforces a perception of Syrians as an economic burden and outsiders who do not integrate or participate fairly in the national economy. Such statements can fuel resentment and depict refugees as exploitative rather than contributive members of society.

*"In Reyhanlı the number of Syrians are more than the Turks. These people will elect their own*

politicians." (March 10, 2024)

Özdağ points out the demographic shift in regions like Reyhanlı, where Syrians reportedly outnumber Turks. He expresses a fear that this demographic change could lead to Syrians gaining political power, possibly at the expense of native Turkish interests. This quote touches on fears of political displacement and cultural erosion, suggesting that the growing Syrian population could eventually influence or control local governance.

*"Our soldiers are in Syria to fight while these Syrians here comb their hair and swim in the sea." (March 13, 2024)*

This statement contrasts the sacrifices of Turkish soldiers in Syria with the perceived comfort of Syrians in Türkiye. Özdağ uses this comparison to invoke a sense of injustice and resentment, implying that while Turkish soldiers are risking their lives, Syrian refugees enjoy leisure and safety within Türkiye. This rhetoric can deepen societal divides and foster anger towards refugees seen as not sharing the burdens of conflict.

*"... Syrians and Afghans here in our country receive our tax money, they steal our jobs, and they do not pay any taxes. How will you retirees be financed?" (March 14, 2024)*

Özdağ emphasizes the financial strain refugees allegedly place on Turkish taxpayers, framing them as beneficiaries of public funds without contributing to the tax base. He also raises concerns about job competition and the sustainability of social services like pensions. This narrative appeals to economic anxieties and positions refugees as a threat to the economic well-being of Turkish citizens, particularly the elderly and vulnerable.

*"... the main problem of our country is the change in the demographic change. such is no migration, it is invasion. Such an invasion will bring about war or destruction ..... They were*

*supposed to be guests but now these people do not perceive themselves as guests. Europeans have convinced the government and Türkiye has become the ditch and the Turkish people are lied to ....."*

(March 21, 2024)

In this quote, Özdağ frames the influx of refugees as an "invasion" rather than migration, suggesting an existential threat to Turkish sovereignty and stability. He warns of potential conflict and societal breakdown, portraying refugees as overstepping their role as temporary guests. This rhetoric taps into fears of national identity loss and perceived betrayal by European policies, fostering a siege mentality among his audience.

*"People have street fights in various neighbourhoods. And we finance these people. We are not safe during the nights. These people are criminalizing, and they trade in drugs and poison our people." (March 21, 2024)*

Özdağ associates the presence of refugees with rising crime and social disorder. By suggesting that refugees are involved in criminal activities such as drug trafficking, he intensifies fears around public safety and social cohesion. This narrative can stigmatize refugees and contribute to a climate of fear and hostility, undermining efforts at peaceful coexistence and integration. Özdağ's statements reflect a potent mix of economic, social, and political anxieties within Türkiye regarding the Syrian refugee crisis invoking fears of economic displacement, demographic shifts, cultural erosion, and rising crime. On the same token there is the portraying of refugees as a drain on public resources and a threat to national sovereignty.

## CONCLUSION

This article has looked into populist movements in Western European countries and the upsurge that triggers tremors in the democratic foundations of the European Union. Despite those scholars may classify populism as thin or as temporary political currents, the attention ought to be drawn to the disruptive characteristics of such movements. At the same time the reality that Western European countries considered to be the cradle of democracy, are undergoing a radical transformation from populist to far-right movements ought to be taken seriously. As seen in this article populists deem concepts such as identity and culture to be means for undemocratic ends by constructing narratives of unity and solidarity. At the same populists believe that identity and culture form the basis of people's right to self-determination. However, it is observed that such narratives often have a discriminatory effect on groups characterized as "the others". This is one of the main criticisms of populism, as it often focuses on empowering one's own communities, while marginalizing other groups and hindering social integration.

The emergence of the Victory Party under the leadership of Ümit Özdağ illustrates the similarities with the European examples and how nationalist rhetoric can significantly influence the social fabric of a country. Such may cause profound challenges to the social harmony and cohesion. Özdağ's discourse, steeped in themes of national identity, economic protectionism, and assertive foreign policy finds support in segments of the Turkish population that feel marginalized or threatened by migration. By framing Syrian refugees as an "invasion" and portraying their presence as an existential threat to Turkish sovereignty, Özdağ taps into fears of cultural erosion and economic displacement. This narrative not only amplifies public anxieties about demographic changes and job competition but also undermines the potential for social integration and peaceful coexistence. Populism, as espoused by the Victory Party thrives on creating divisions between the "true people" and perceived external and internal enemies. This dichotomy may erode social trust and bring about a climate of suspicion and resentment. The portrayal of refugees as economic burdens and threats to national security simplifies complex socio-economic dynamics and shifts the focus away from systemic issues. It also risks deepening societal rifts by casting refugees not as individuals seeking refuge but as collective adversaries undermining the nation's stability. Such rhetoric can lead to policies that prioritize exclusion and restriction over inclusion and support, potentially resulting in societal fragmentation. The populist approach of the Victory Party, with its emphasis on protecting national interests at the expense of multiculturalism and humanitarian considerations, exemplifies how populism can threaten the social existence of a country. It underscores the need for political discourse that promotes unity and addresses the root causes of social and economic challenges rather than exploiting them for political gain.

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The author declared that he has contributed to this article alone. Yazar bu çalışmaya tek başına katkı sağladığını beyan etmiştir.

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There is no conflict of interest with any institution. Yazarla herhangi bir kurum/kuruluş arasında çıkar çatışması yoktur.

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The author declared that the ethical rules are followed in all preparation processes of this study. In the event of a contrary situation, Pamukkale Journal of Eurasian Socioeconomic Studies has no responsibility, and all responsibility belongs to the author of the study. Bu çalışmanın tüm hazırlanma süreçlerinde etik kurallara uyulduğunu yazar beyan eder. Aksi bir durumun tespiti halinde Pamukkale Avrasya Sosyoekonomik Çalışmalar Dergisi hiçbir sorumluluğu olmayıp, tüm sorumluluk çalışmanın yazarına aittir.

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